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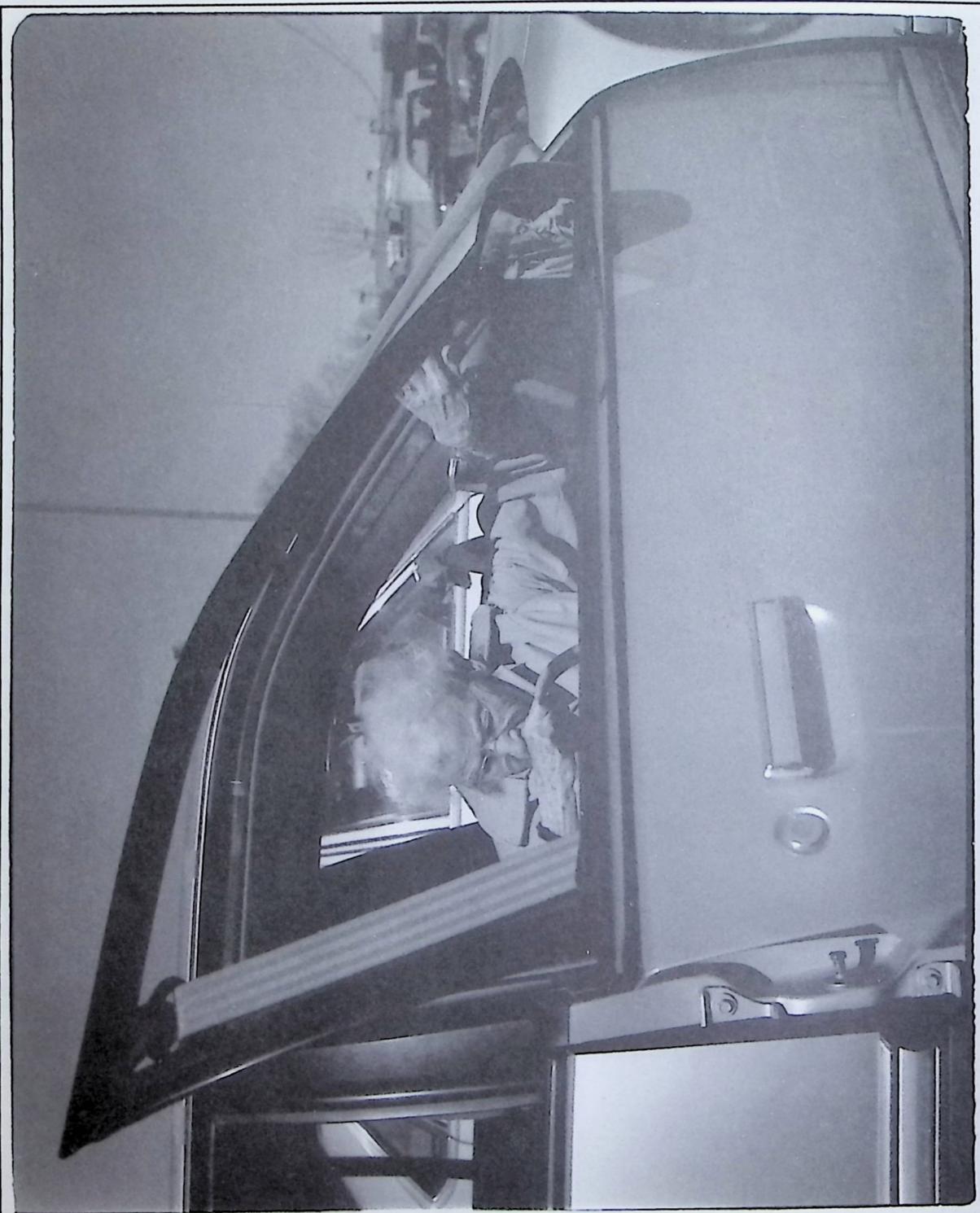
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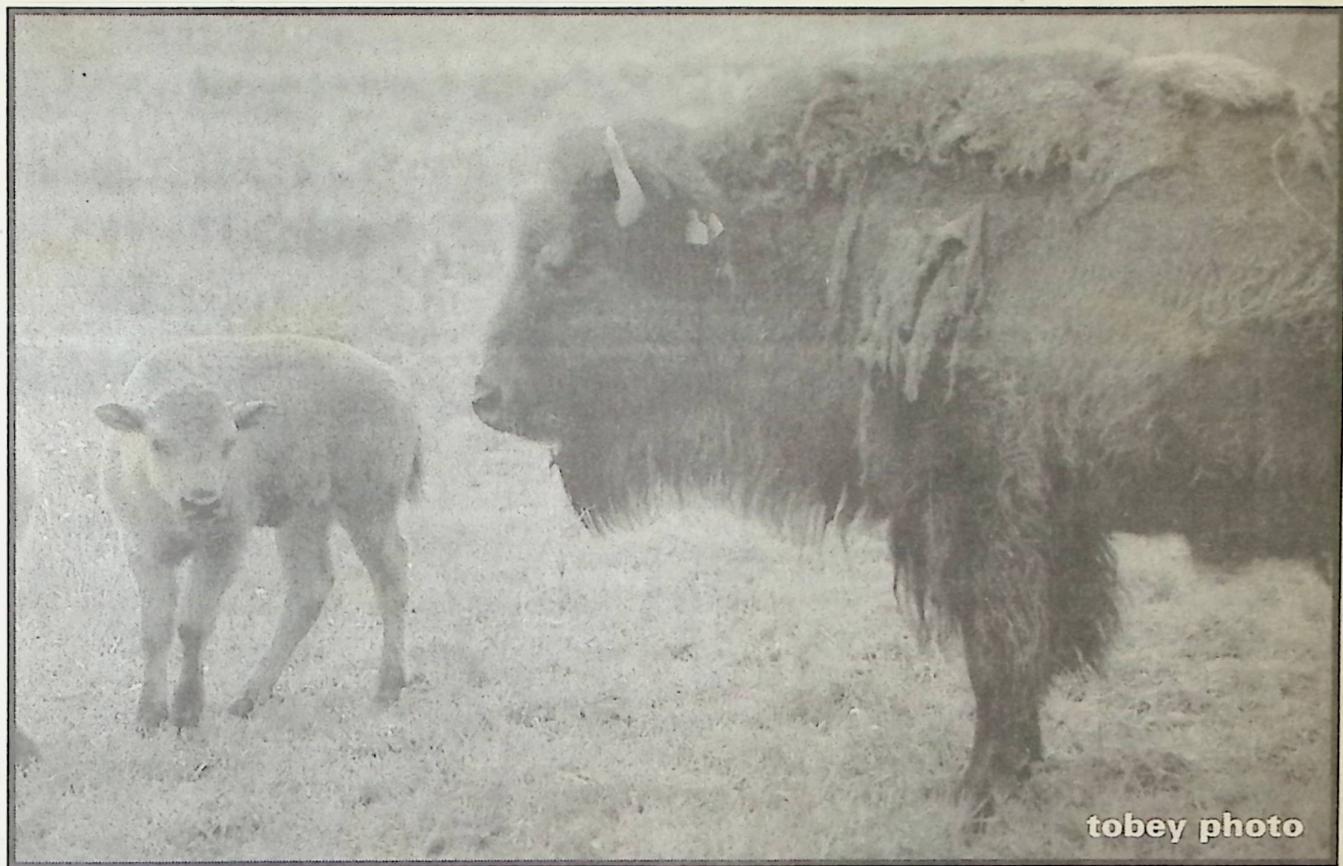
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From the Modern American Indignities Series; Chapter One - The Automobile (Northampton Serv-U Lot, 1998).

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on the nature of NATURE

RUSSELL
CARLIN

As we approach the end of a millennium, we are living on the edge of a revolution in the way Western culture views the world of nature and our connection to it. The old views taught us that everything is separate: me from you, us from animals, living things from non-living things. Since the beginning of this century, however, science has found that separation is not truly the case. Quantum physics, systems theory and the Gaia hypothesis are just some of the scientific discoveries and theories that are showing us that we are not separate from the world around us. In fact, quite the opposite: We are woven into the fabric of the world and when it moves, we move.

A few years ago, my friend, Bill, took me for one of his hikes in the Quabbin. He knew the woods well. I had spent a considerable amount of time in the woods, hiking the various trails in and around the Valley. But, on the warm, late Spring day that Bill took me on one of his hikes, I was surprised when we left the hiking path. Bill climbed over some scrub brush and began to lead me into the forest of the Quabbin. He paused and told me that to hike with him, we wouldn't talk unless we whispered and that I should try and walk quietly, avoiding snapping twigs and kicking stones.

Bill and I spent hours in the forest. In that time we followed the barely visible paths of deer and identified the tracks and scat of numerous animals. We saw an eagle soaring in the distance - a first for me. And, most astonishingly for me, we snuck up on a group of deer, by walking upwind from them and moving at what seemed an infinitesimally slow speed. We got within a hundred feet and spent a half hour watching them. By the end of our hike, I realized that my "hikes" in nature had been about as connected to the natural world around me as a drive through an animal park "safari" was to traveling in the African savanna.

Mostly, I became aware that my hikes through the woods were about my "visiting" nature. Bill's hikes were about "experiencing" nature. One was about being separate from the natural world, the other was about realizing that we are, essentially, part of the natural world. For many of us we experience nature as something we visit and leave. As if "our world" were completely different. On one level this is true: The world of the city is very different than the

forest of the Quabbin or the mountains of the Rockies. But, if we step back from the specifics and look more globally, *everything* is nature. We are animals and our habitats are, though diverse, the places we live in. Still, we see ourselves as being separate or even better than the world of nature. We are the "highest" species. During the last several centuries, religion and science have pulled things apart and even though many great things have come from it, it has left us with a damaged planet, a lack of resources and a spiritual emptiness. Of course, this is a view particular to the Western world. There are and have been other cultures that see things differently.

Other Cultural Views

Native American cultures, generally, view men and women as being intimately connected to the world around us. Their world is filled with rituals that honor our connections to nature and make our interactions with the world one of honor, not of exploitation. The Oglala Sioux use a term "Wakan-Tanka" to describe what might be called "World Mind." Essentially, this idea reflects the belief that within our individual, finite minds lies the infinite mind of the universe. So, our need to honor and respect our world does not mean only respecting something outside of us; it is also to honor and respect ourselves.

The idea of "Wakan-Tanka" is similar to the Chinese concept of the Tao. The Tao is a force or guiding principle for the universe. The Tao is what makes the rivers flow and the leaves fall from the trees in the autumn. It is also a guiding principle for how we can live our lives. If we can listen and follow the subtle language of the Tao, we will move through our lives in the smoothest manner, like a river flowing around a rock. If we resist the Tao, our lives become more complicated and stressful, like trying to stand in front of the rock and holding back the river. Taoist sages learn the language of the Tao by studying nature. This was not done in an analytical manner. It is like a mentor relationship where nature reveals the Tao naturally and one can distill the lesson and apply it to one's life.

Over the last several decades, as the conflict over old perspectives and new perspectives on our connection to nature have begun to surface, it is interesting to note that many people have "returned" to these "old" cultural views and found that they speak to them on a level that science hasn't. It is only recently that science itself has begun to open itself up to a "new" view.

Scientific Views on Nature

During the current millennium, science has risen up and supplanted religion as the focal point for our knowledge of the world. Early on in the

creation of what is known as modern science, people like Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes sought to break down the world and put it back together in such a way as to explain it. Newton set up the beginnings of the field of physics with his explanations of the motion of objects and the discovery of gravity. Descartes is famous for having framed the outlook of science by seeing the universe as a huge mindless machine that was set into motion at some point - perhaps by God - and that has been running continuously, according to strict laws since. And, he felt, if we can take apart the machine and figure out how it works, we will explain how everything in our world works.

This outlook on our world translates to almost all sciences. Medical doctors see the human body as a smaller machine that can be broken down and fixed piece by piece. Biologists look at plants and animals in isolation. Essentially, science has been interested in isolating all elements down to singular aspects to focus on. By doing this, it has been thought, we could know how the larger aspects worked.

This was especially true in the field of physics. First the atom was discovered. Then the search went on for the smaller particles that made up atoms. Neutrons, protons and electrons were discovered, like so many billiard balls hovering around like tiny solar systems making up the physical world we are a part of. But, at the beginning of this century, physics received a wake up call.

In the macro-world, Newtonian physics works. The laws of motion apply and gravity occurs. But, at the micro level, things are completely different. There are no smallest particles, per se. It was discovered that at the micro level, one could not find particles all of the time. In fact, depending on the instruments used, things at this level could act like a particle or they could act like a wave. In acting like a wave they behaved similarly to sound waves - vast open fields instead of billiard ball-like particles. And, unlike the separateness of Newtonian physics, it was found that at the micro level, events in one region will have instantaneous influences in another region, even if the regions are separated by great distances. This would happen without any information or energy exchanges, which is an impossibility according to classical physics, unless they were somehow interconnected in a way that we don't experience directly in our macro world.

So, what does this mean? Even though it is beyond our ability to visualize and difficult to fully describe, at the micro level everything breaks down into waves of energy - dancing waves of motion. And, these waves extend out everywhere in energy fields. So, at the micro level we extend beyond each other. We are connected to each other, to the world around us, to plants, animals, rocks. We are not separate. The illusion of the separation of you and me is just that - an illusion.

Contemporary Views

Systems theory is the science of relationships. It looks at phenomena and how they relate

to the larger world. It asks, "What are the interconnections?" Systemic thinking is permeating many worlds: biology, psychology, organizational development. Systemic thinking has had an impact on how we view the environment and it's effect on our world: From the small level of pesticides in our back garden harming our vegetables and leaching into our drinking supply, to the effects of deforestation on the ozone layer which protects us from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays.

Even our bodies are systems, not static "structures" that do not change. As you sit and read this your heart is continually beating, your digestive tract is moving and metabolizing food and nutrients. Your brain cells and nerve cells are firing off at an astonishing rate. Your pancreas will replace all of its cells every twenty-four hours. The cells of your stomach lining will be completely replaced in three days. In ten days, your white blood cells will be renewed. 98 percent of the protein in your brain will be turned over in less than one month. One hundred thousand of your skin cells are replaced in one minute. We are a flowing ever-changing dance of matter and energy.

Systems theory is seen at its greatest extent in the concept of the Gaia theory. The Gaia hypothesis was developed in the 1970's by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis (of the University of MA, Amherst). Simply put, Gaia theorists believe that the entire biosphere (which includes our planet and the atmosphere around it) acts like a large organism. The interplay of man, animals, plants and even non-living systems like rocks, oceans and the atmosphere, sustain and give life to our planet. According to Gaia theory, the Earth is a self-regulatory system. In other words, if something is irregular in the system, the Earth will respond to correct it, not unlike an infection in our bodies being dealt with by the immune system. So, are we still at the top of the ladder when it comes to our power? Or, if things get bad enough, will our planet deal with us like a bad cold? Earthquakes, floods, diseases? Maybe we should begin to listen.

So, my friend Bill had it right. By walking quietly in the Quabbin and looking for the subtle signs of the forest, perhaps he was tapping into the very connection that many of us fail to notice. Do we notice the fact that we are walking downwind? Are we walking around stepping on large twigs and talking loudly?

We can pretend to walk through the woods by following the old paths and say that we are communing with nature. Or we can stop and notice the breaks in low branches that herald a deer path. We can stop and notice a paw print in the mud and realize that a small animal had also walked on the same path before us. As with past revolutions of science, it will take time for this type of thinking to ease itself into the other sciences, our culture, and our personal views of the world. Maybe we can begin by no longer "visiting" the forest and start instead by "experiencing" it.

THERE'S A SUCKER BORN EVERY MINUTE...

...and we should be thankful: Reviled by reputation, loathed for their looks, lamprey are vital to the health of the Connecticut River

Story & Art by Stephen R. Bissette

Lamprey are ugly.

That's the fact of it, right? Well, no, not really.

When we see them clinging to the walls of the fish ladders, attached to a fisherman's boot, or dangling from the side of a live fish, our response is immediate:

"Lamprey are disgusting."

Ugly. Disgusting. However emphatically we say and feel it, though, this *isn't* a fact.

It's just an emotional reaction, an irrational gut-level revulsion. Often the

only remaining queasy chord of empathy any of us feel for fish —

the host fish the lamprey are attached to, that is, not the lamprey itself.

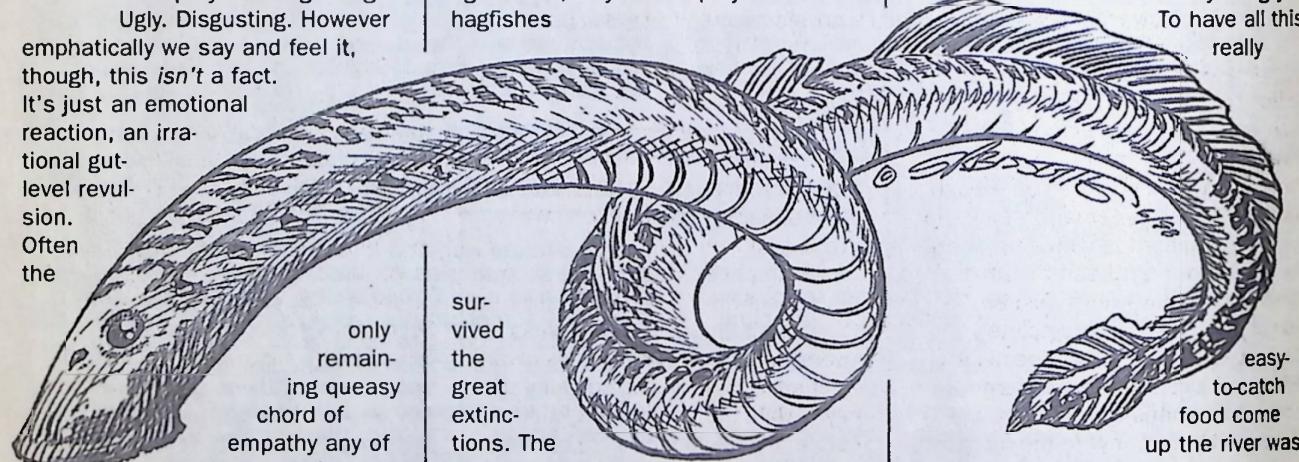
With that gut reaction comes a wave of profound loathing accompanied by the urge to tear the parasite away and crush it, a nasty rush identical to that we feel toward a tick or (more to the point) a leech found on our own skin. It's a primal rush from the very core of our being, and one that goes deeper than just our dread of parasitism. Lamprey seem completely alien, an easily hated "other." Their primitive anatomy — barely-visible eyes, a jawless circular mouth brimming with rasping teeth, rounded gill slits punctuating each side of the head,

and the complete lack of scales, bones, paired fins, and a sympathetic nervous system — even sets them apart from the rest of the fishes.

Actually, lamprey were among the first fishes. The *Agnatha* (from the Greek *gnathos*, "jaw," and the prefix *a*, "without") date back nearly 500 million years. Agnathans diversified and flourished in the Devonian seas, and simple eel-like fishes named *Anaspids* which thrived in Silurian and early Devonian waters (430-400 million years ago) seem to represent the earliest lamprey forms. Of all the agnathans, only the lamprey and hagfishes

salmon particularly got taken back to the villages to feed the tribes. But in the meantime, the guys who were actually doing the fishing were sustaining themselves with things like alewives and sea lamprey. Lamprey don't require any gear [to catch], because you can just walk up to the base of the waterfall and grab them with your hand, yank them off a rock and throw them on shore. So they were a high energy food source right when the Indians needed them. By the time the lampreys are running in April, the tribal winter stores had been depleted and so these guys

were really hungry. To have all this really



survived the great extinctions. The sea lamprey

we know today, *Petromyzon marinus*, were here long before we were.

"They're absolutely native," says Stephen Gephard at the Fisheries Division of the Department of Environmental Protection in Connecticut. "In fact, they were here long before the salmon and shad and alewives were here. As a primitive species, they were probably here when North America looked a lot different than it does now."

Since the coming of man, lamprey have played a role in our food cycle, too. "Hundreds of years ago, the Connecticut Indians loved lamprey," Gephard explains. "The Indians would collect at the waterfalls to fish for salmon and shad, and a lot of the

very important."

In the Middle Ages, Europeans considered lamprey a delicacy (and many still do). England's King Henry I died on December 1st, 1135, after gorging himself on lamprey. Colonials imported the taste for lamprey to the New World; along the Merrimac River in New Hampshire, lamprey was commonly referred to as "Deeryfield Beef." Lamprey were sold in New England markets up to the mid-1800s, and their larvae continue to be used as bait.

Once they ceased to be a favored or commercially viable food item, however, lamprey soon hit the cultural shitlist. Given their unpleasant appearance and repugnant feeding habits, it should come as no sur-

prise that lampreys were eventually demonized. Fishermen and biologists sometimes find the disc-shaped scars of lampreys' mouths on salmon (more often evidence of their oceanic life than of their fresh-water travels, though exhausted lamprey struggling upstream will attach themselves to any object available, including other fishes). Ken Cox of the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife notes that "we do occasionally see what is called a 'transformer' — that is, a young lamprey that is on its way downstream to the sea. At that point they switch over into a parasitic life stage, and occasionally — it's rare — occasionally we see a shad move upstream with a 'transformer' attached to it. But that's a mistake on the part of the 'transformer' going back upriver," Cox chuckles. "That's not where it wants to go."

Cox has even heard tell of "anglers, say, in the Deerfield River, standing out in the lower river fishing, and the lamprey will come up and latch onto your waders, your hip boots, just to sort of secure a position and take a breather on their trip upriver." Gephard laughs a bit when he relates having "been told that these things have hurt children," rumors which proved completely false. Lamprey in the Connecticut River and local streams pose no threat to humans whatsoever, and precious little (if any) to the local fish population.

Yes, they're ugly, disgusting, perhaps. But are they a problem?

When asked about "the problem" with sea lampreys in the Connecticut River, Stephen Gephard cuts to the chase: "We don't have a problem with sea lampreys. I guess the only problem we have is public perception: What are these irresponsible biologists doing letting them come back into our waters?" Cox stresses "the concerns the land-locked population of sea lampreys in Lake Champlain — the same species we

have in the Connecticut River — have raised on the part of resource managers and anglers because of the impact on fisheries in the Lake is a different situation from the Connecticut River. The river's population is not land-locked, not parasitic." Cox adds, "We do get asked at, say, the Vernon fish ladder, why don't we take them out? By the human-imposed perspective, if they don't look good, why don't we get rid of them? There's a lot of that. Most critters of the world don't look good, at least to our eyes," he chuckles, "but in our opinion, they don't cause a problem. They're part of the fish community, and we don't see any threat of them parasitizing on fresh-water fish."

Gephard has been actively involved with the restoration of local sea lamprey breeding grounds throughout his twenty years with the Department. "What we're doing," he says, "just like they're doing in Vermont, is we're restoring all anadromous fish [fish which migrate to fresh-water spawning grounds] to targeted streams in Connecticut. We're involved with Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts in the Connecticut River program. Atlantic Salmon and Shad get all the press coverage, but in fact it includes a variety of species, including sea lamprey." While the Department works to restore the habitats of more beloved species (such as sea-run brown trout, alewife, blueback herring, and shad), Gephard notes that "a lot of these streams have sea lamprey runs, and we're restoring them, too."

Lamprey are hardly a primary focus

case, the efforts devoted to other species. "If it was just the sea lamprey kicking around, we probably wouldn't justify the construction of the fish ladders and other management tools to restore them on their own," Gephard emphasizes.

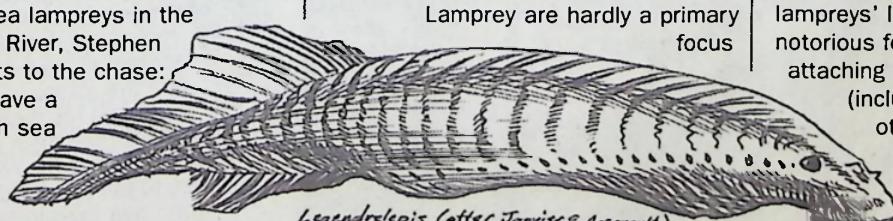
"Americans don't eat 'em, like other places in the world do, and they certainly don't support recreational fishing, and there aren't too many chapters of 'Sea Lamprey Unlimited' out there. We wouldn't have initiated restoration on their own, but in the meantime we are working on behalf of other species that need fish ladders. So when we build fish ladder for salmon, shad, or blueback herring, the sea lampreys benefit also, because they go through the fishways and are reunited with their historical spawning and nursery habitat upstream. And that's great, because the restoration of the species is beneficial."

However unpopular lamprey may remain among fishermen and the civilian population, marine biologists can't afford to cater to such biases. "We start off with the philosophical understanding that every species — especially every native species — serves a role, occupies a niche," Gephard explains. "Even if we humans aren't intelligent enough to recognize what those benefits are, they obviously have benefits because they have survived for tens of thousands of years. Something right is happening."

Essential to this understanding is a working knowledge of the lampreys' life cycle. Lamprey are notorious for their feeding habits, attaching themselves to host fishes (including salmon, trout, and others) with their rasping teeth and keeping their victim's blood fluid with a potent anticoagulating agent in their saliva. Once the host's life juices are drained, the lamprey detaches itself, seeking a new host.

Land-locked sea lamprey can have a devastating effect on fresh-water fish populations. They are reportedly taking a toll on game fish

in this process, but as in their life cycle, they benefit from "piggy-backing" on other species, or, in this



The link between the anaspids & modern lamprey

in only one New England land-locked lake, Lake Champlain. Forced to live out their complete life cycle in large bodies of fresh water, parasitic young adults and adults have no choice but to actively feed on fellow lake fish. The most dramatic example of such a potentially disastrous infestation remains that which ravaged commercial fishing in the American Great Lakes region prior to the 1960's, depleting annual catches of eleven million pounds of lake trout and other catch to almost nothing within three decades.

Gephard reminds us, however, that such is *not* the case in the Connecticut River and its tributaries. "These fish are not feeding in fresh water," he asserts, "so there's no threat to other fish stocks in that way." Sea lamprey primarily feed while adults in the open sea. During the spring months, from March through May, lamprey cease feeding to move upstream into shallow fresh water streams to spawn. As Ken Cox puts it, "Basically, when they enter fresh water, what they are is a mobile sex organ. They're not feeding, they're not doing much of anything. They're an organism that's transporting its eggs and sperm upriver to a suitable spawning habitat. That's their sole purpose once they hit fresh water."

"I like to take it one step further," Gephard continues. "It's not just that they're not harmful; they're actually beneficial. A lot of these coastal streams in New England that have been glaciated are very sterile and with low productivity compared to down South. If you head South and start looking at the Shenandoah River, the Cape Fear River, the Saint John's River, or even over into the Mississippi River Valley, those are very productive streams, and fish grow fast. But the New England streams have been glaciated: they're very bony and rocky, with low productivity."

Ironic in light of

the lamprey's parasitic reputation, their unique life cycle directly enhances and enriches our native fresh water systems. "What we see," Gephard explains, "is the young sea lamprey depart for the ocean when they're only a few inches long and a couple of grams in weight, so that they're exporting very little energy out of the system. Now, two years later, they come back, and they're close to thirty or more inches long, and a couple of pounds full of good ocean-subsidized energy. They come in, and they all die." But not before they spawn: after locating a rocky bottom suitable for the process, male and female lamprey work together to prepare the nest. Using their toothy oral disks, they pick up rocks and clear a two-to-three foot,

six-inch deep depression in which to lay their eggs. The female lays up to 200,000 eggs, the male sprays his sperm over them, and shortly thereafter the exhausted parents die.

During every stage of this process, the lamprey play a vital role in the local ecology. From the moment they begin swimming upstream, they literally begin to feed the system. "As living migrating adult fish, there are predators that will eat them," Gephard tells us. By building their nests as they do, lamprey aid other fishes. "The exact location of where these lamprey are spawning in the gravel riffles [small rapids] of the streams quite often correspond to the same places where trout and salmon (and a lot of other stream species, particularly the minnows) will spawn later in the season. Over the winter, a lot of sand and silt collects in these rocks. Well, the sea lampreys come in and start lifting these rocks and moving them around to build their nest, and you see a large amount of silt and sand that has built up in the gravel be flushed out and moved downstream. Not only has that cleaned it out for subsequent spawners in the season, but we find that a lot of your minnow species, like common shiners and fallfish and the dace, will actually spawn in the sea lamprey nest, because they build this pile of rocks at the downstream side of the nest and the minnows will go there and lay their eggs and let their eggs drop there among the rocks, too, to gain protection from their predators. There's a real symbiosis going on between these species of fish."

Once the lamprey lay their eggs, the symbiosis continues. "Their spawn itself is fed on by a lot of fish," Gephard says. "I've snorkeled among spawning lamprey and



I've watched many species sit behind the spawning fish and gobble down their eggs." Juvenile trout, common shiners, American eel, darters, and others feed on lamprey spawn every spring.

Once the adult lamprey die, "everything eats them," says Gephard. "I've seen raccoons and mink and otters go into the river for the carcasses, and other fish will eat them." Gephard considers the lamprey carcasses particularly vital to fresh water insects. "These carcasses, when they're on the bottom of the river, get just completely covered with Caddisfly larvae. And the Caddisfly larvae are grazers, like — I hate to bring up an unpleasant image — almost like maggots. They swarm all over these things, and consume the dead sea lamprey. And Caddisflies are extremely important to the ecosystem. Everything, including trout and salmon and everything that swims, eats them. So what you're seeing is this wholesale importation of a whole lot of energy that came from the ocean and is now deposited into the ecosystem of the inland watersheds."

Unlike the ongoing effort to replace the lost native strain of Atlantic Salmon with fresh Atlantic Salmon stock, the restoration of sea lamprey habitats have an all-important edge. "With the salmon, we had to start all over again bringing fish in. We've been using a non-native strain of salmon because the native strain of salmon was completely lost," Gephard explains. "What's happened is the strain of Atlantic Salmon we're using has imperfectly adapted to the watershed. They're coming along, but they're coming along real slow because we've got to let natural selection and stock development take its course. In a manner of speaking, evolution is re-occurring, and this new strain of salmon is evolving before our very eyes." The sea lamprey, however, is an entirely different kettle of fish. "We never lost the native strain," Gephard says. "We built all these dams, but there was always a little bit of habitat downstream of the dams where these populations hung on and spawned in very low numbers."

Thus far, the lamprey have reasserted themselves. Vermont Fish and Wildlife's Ken Cox notes "relatively low numbers of lamprey moving above the Bellows Falls fish ladder; a rough estimate for this year is that we

passed 190 lamprey above Bellows Falls." Cox reports that lamprey do spawn above Bellows Falls, with lamprey young (the non-parasitic ammocoete stage) found in the Black River, Williams River, and West River and "areas like that which provide good ammocoete habitat."

Gephard says that threats to lamprey habitat restoration currently exist only in "a localized sense." Despite justifiable ongoing concerns about water pollution and destruction of streams, Gephard notes that "the trend for water quality throughout New England, and the trend for habitat protection, is pretty good. There may be some hot spots throughout the region where waters are being polluted, but the state agencies are probably working with the offending parties to take care of that fairly quickly.

"In terms of the habitat itself, we're a lot more aware than we were years ago, so I don't think we're abusing our rivers as much. I think that the future looks pretty rosy for sea lampreys because they migrate very well. It's a very resilient species. It's the oldest fish species in North America. They're very adaptive. The worst thing that could happen right now would be if well-meaning, but misinformed, people get upset about sea lampreys being back and force state agencies to make some ill-advised management

decisions." Gephard has already allayed the fears of a number of communities with careful explanation of the lampreys' importance to healthy fresh-water ecosystems.

"One of the buzzwords going around these days is biodiversity," Gephard says, suggesting that "we all have to realize that biodiversity means a diversity of species of all descriptions, even if it means snakes and spiders and slugs and mosquitoes and things we normally don't like. Unless you're Portuguese and love to eat them, lampreys fall into that category for most Americans.

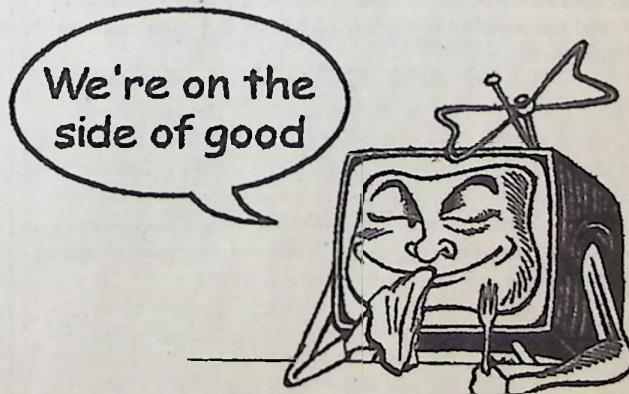
"I think over the years we're going to see more and more sea lampreys coming up everywhere, and I believe that's good," Gephard concludes. "They're not going to win a beauty contest, but so what?"

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Your home is not your home. You may think that this space that you return to after work, your oasis from the world, is your empire. But you're wrong. Mankind has never been truly alone: we decide to share, or we decide to destroy. When we decide to destroy, nature fights back with her best weapons.

In that spirit, come with me for a few minutes as I tear up the floorboards and look at nature's secret weapon, who follows us wherever we go: the rat.

Getting to Know Rats

Yes, Virginia, we have rats in Western Massachusetts. They can be an urban phenomenon, but not exclusively. In Holyoke, Chicopee, Springfield, and even in the paradise that is said to be Northampton, the pitter-patter

of rodent feet sends some folks reaching for strong poisons. In 1995, officials closed down the playscape at Northampton's Jackson Street Elementary School after several rats were seen playing there. The city's health agent at the time noted it wasn't a big deal, but they just wanted to be extra careful. In general, he said, wild rats are afraid of human activity.

The feeling is generally mutual (though there are some exceptions). Some say it's the unhuman intelligence betrayed in a rat's gaze that gives people the creeps, or simply the long, naked tail. It may be because rats have such an intimate relationship with us that many people are repulsed by them: they remind us of the filth that we try to rise up from. Our fear can become practically obsessive. But then rats may warrant the obsession.

I stole the title of this article from a film which I consider the *Moby Dick* of the rat world, *Of Unknown Origin*. The movie portrays the psychological deterioration of a yuppie who discovers a rat making a home of his posh Manhattan condominium. The yuppie, played in a marvelously creepy fashion by Peter Weller (who's good at these things) becomes the Rat Rambo, arming himself to the teeth and obsessively reading magazine articles on the rattiness of the world.

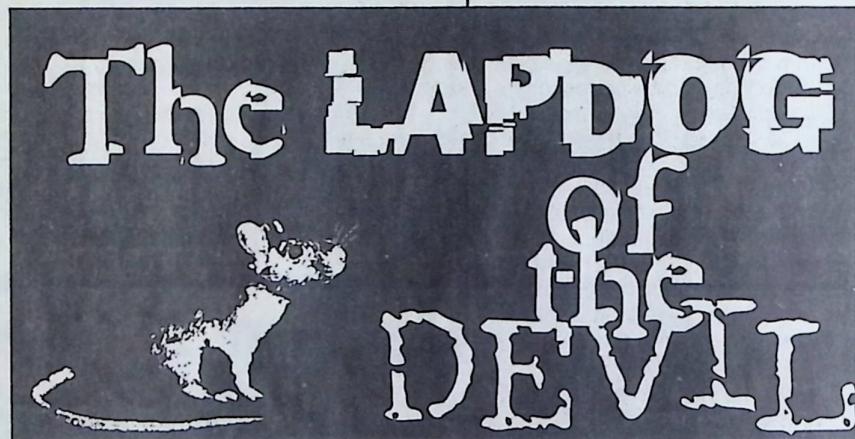
At a fancy dinner party for his boss and a new prospective client, our hero launches into a feverish monologue:

In the fourteenth century the rat carried the bubonic plague flea that killed one out of every three people from India to Iceland . . . the most horrible catastrophe in history, over one third of the entire civilized world destroyed by rats — not bombs, not guns,

but RATS . . . you take your average rat: it can wriggle through a hole no bigger than a quarter, swim half a mile and tread water for three days, they can eat through lead and concrete with these teeth that are like chisels that exert an unbelievable 24,000 pounds per square inch per tooth!

Yeah, they can survive being flushed down a toilet and enter a building by the same route. They can fall five stories down on the ground, and run off unharmed. And two rats — mind you, two, just two — will give you 20 million rats in just three years. They say now there are as many rats on this planet now as people . . .

Yes, it's all pretty much true, and he's leaving out the scary stuff. There's something about having rats in your life that gets you telling stories. You talk to anyone who's lived in a big city, New York in particular, and you will regularly get excited descriptions of behemoth rats. So far, though, no major size fluctuations in rats have been reported in the scientific community.



All This and a Big Scaly Tail, Too

Rats come from a big family. The scientific order Rodentia is the biggest in the mammal world, and there are 500 species in the family Muridae, which includes rats, mice and their cousins.

There are a number of wild rats native to this country, such as the rice rat, cotton rat and wood rat. These species tend to be more attractive and unassuming in the wild, and are not considered pests. They are all around pretty boring to me, so I'm going to concentrate on what most people actually picture when they think of rats, the members of the *Rattus* genus, namely *Rattus norvegicus* and of course the cleverly named *Rattus rattus*.

As is the case with most things that can make our lives unpleasant, *Rattus norvegicus* and *Rattus rattus* came here from Europe. And like the Europeans crowding cafes and littering the streets with French cigarette butts, they like to congregate in cities, where the action is. Truth be told, however, this European annoyance actually originally came from Asia. Kind of like spaghetti.

Both ratti came to North America relatively late in the continent's history. Native Americans didn't have Euro-rats to worry about before white people came, but by then they had more to worry about than a bunch of rats.

Rattus rattus, or the black rat (also known as the roof rat, the grey-bellied rat, the Alexandrine Rat, the climbing rat, and the gray rat), came to the United States around 1609, and was your American rat of choice until the 1700s. He gets the

name "roof rat" from his tendency to climb to the roof of building and other high elevations. The black rat is the fellow who provided transportation for the Bubonic Plague throughout the world. Other treats they've brought to the table included typhus, salmonella, tularemia, trichinosis and rabies, though one expert tells us they don't actually transmit rabies because they have a "dry bite."

R. Rattus tends to prefer warmer climates than ours, and is generally not as common as his cousin, *R. Norvegicus*. The black rat saw a drop in predominance a couple of centuries ago. As much as we'd like to say it, man was not the one to blame. That we can pin on his cousin, and his main predator, *Rattus norvegicus*.

Rattus Norvegicus, or the Norway rat (also known as the wharf rat, the sewer rat, the brown rat, and the barn rat) is Ratto Numero Uno. Although he was a relative latecomer (Norway rats arrived on the North American seaboard in 1775), the Norway rat had his smaller cousin running up onto rooftops in a few years.

The Norway rat is bigger and stockier than the black rat, measuring about 12 to 18 inches long and weighing about ten ounces. He is not as good a climber, but still agile. He is a great swimmer, though, as is attested by the case of a rat in a researcher's tank of warm water: the rat swam continuously for three days before drowning. Another Norway rat was known to have swum 80 feet underwater. Traveling aboard ships, these rats have made the entire world their home, excepting Antarctica.

In captivity, a rat will live 1.5 to about three years. In the wild, they live about a year. Still, they make up for the brief time they have with us. Unlike some animals, they are able to breed all year long, and they can start having baby rats, called pinkies, when they are three months old. They gestate for only about 21 to 22 days, and they are known to have had litters as large as 22, although eight to 10 is a more usual number. A doe¹ may give birth 12 times a year, producing about 100 pinkies, each about the size of a cocktail wiener. Then those each have a hundred, and so on.

¹ Yes, they call them that, or a queen. The male is called a buck, and after the babies' eyes are open, they call them pups. Any Sinatra fan will be able to tell you that rats travel in packs, but another term for a pack of rats is a mischief.



by Punco Godyn

Scientists refer to rats as commensal, which literally means they sit at the dinner table with us. Rats will eat anything their teeth can cut into, and their teeth have been known to cut into metal pipes and concrete. They continually gnash their teeth, which never stop growing. According to rat maven Dr. Robert M. Corrigan, "Measured on Moh's scale of scratch hardness, the incisors measure 5.5, which is harder than iron (4.0) and several other metals."

They don't live on concrete, of course. Their diet generally includes anything we eat, including breads and grains, eggs and chickens. Norway rats have been known to kill wild birds, snakes, fish, young pigs and lambs, as well as black rats and their

own young. Norway rats will eat at least a third of their body weight in a day. What makes them a pest, though, is the fact that they are sloppy eaters, and will waste a good portion of the food they've gotten into, leaving it shat upon and unfit for human consumption.

And while they may eat at our table, sometimes we are on the menu. According to a 1929 account cited by Corrigan,

In the Walker colliery, near Killingsworth, in which many horses were employed, the rats had accumulated in great multitudes. It was customary at holiday times to bring to the surface the horses and the fodder, and to close the pit for a time. On one occasion, when the holiday had extended to 10 days or a fortnight, during which the rats had been deprived of food, on reopening the pit, the first man who descended was attacked by the starving rats and speedily killed and devoured.²

On a diet such as this, an adult Norway Rat will grow to about 18 inches long, nose to tailtip, and will weigh about a pound. The rat's tail, a scaly, practically hairless affair, will help a rat keep cool, allowing the rat's body heat to vent similarly to a dog's panting. The tail also helps the rat keep its balance and communicate with other rats.

Rats have pretty poor eyesight, and are colorblind.

² "Monster rat" stories like this are legion, and should be taken with a grain of salt. Or rat poison.

They will move around a lot to compensate and get a better view. When stressed out, a rat may exude a red discharge from its eyes or nose. This is isn't blood, but porphyrin, produced by a gland behind the eyes.

They make up for their bad eyes with their sense of smell. They continually sniff and leave odor trails for other rats to follow. Males tend to smell a bit stronger than females: their skin secretes an oily substance which can make their fur greasy. One rat lover tells us that their fur smells like grape soda. I'm not so sure.

RAT FLICKS: A SHORT LIST

Willard (1971)

Ben (1972)

The Rats are Coming!

The Werewolves are Here! (1972)

Food of the Gods (1976)

The Secret of NIMH (1982)

Of Unknown Origin (1983)

Ratboy (1986)

Food of the Gods II (1989)

Graveyard Shift (1990)

Burial of the Rats (1995)

This Means War

If you decide that you can't peacefully coexist with the rat, you've got some work ahead of you. Rats have been following our camps for centuries, so they don't easily pick up and go. Poison is one of the more common ways to get them out of your house, but it's not a simple matter of slipping them a mickey and tossing the ex-rats in a baggie.

The most commonly used poisons in recent years, warfarin or fumarin, are recommended because of their relatively low toxicity for pets and humans, but it's a nasty way to go for the rat. It packs a double punch by first inhibiting blood clotting and then causing internal hemorrhaging.

While the rat is bleeding to death, warfarin dehydrates him as well. If you're lucky, it will leave your house in its search for a final drink. The poison creates ulcers in the rat's stomach, and as rats can't vomit, they may just end up choking to death. If you are too squeamish to take part in this, and worry about the risk of breaking your finger in a rat trap, there's the Rat Zapper, which electrocutes them.

You could always sic' your cat on them. Yeah, right.

If you want to avoid this bloody battle, you can discourage rats from nibbling into your life with sheet metal and thick cement throughout the vulnerable parts of your house. But tell your neighbor, as the rats will likely move into his place.

Concerns about relocating rats were recently on the

minds of folks in the Boston area, where legislators have lined the pockets of the construction industry for that obscenely expensive boondoggle, the Central Artery. The underground project had been expected to displace about 13 million cubic yards of soil from under the city of Boston, and an unknown quantity of rats.

It makes sense. Building demolishers are known to leave rat bait in buildings slated for the wrecking ball, so the rodents don't get hip and take up living elsewhere. About five years ago, they brought in some big guns and formed a sort of rat control think tank. I recently sent an E-mail to the Big Digs World Wide Web site, with the subject heading WHERE WILL ALL THE RATS GO to get their attention. I got the following terse reply:

Through a comprehensive program involving the project, the city, and businesses along the Artery alignment, the rat problem was basically headed off at the pass. Baiting, trapping, and prevention all together prevented a rat problem from developing at all.

Unhuh.

Pets and Pests

But maybe we can all just get along. More and more people, myself included, have made that leap and are welcoming rats into their homes.

Debbie "The Rat Lady" Ducommun, founder of The Rat Fan Club, said that in some parts of the country (particularly in her home state of California) they have surpassed the hamster in popularity.³ For about four to six bucks at Dave's Soda and Pet Food City, you can provide yourself with a couple years' worth of companionship. The hardcore rat nuts go to shows, where they watch a myriad of rats: Agouti, Berkshire, Black, Black Eyed White, Blue, Buff, Capped, Champagne, Chocolate, Cinnamon, Himalayan, Hooded, Irish, Mink, Pearl, Pink Eyed White, Siamese, Silver Fawn, Silvered and Topaz.

Why the interest? Well, according to rat fanciers, they are intelligent and personable.

Debbie says, "They're much more intelligent than other small pets. In fact, like cats and dogs, rats can learn their names and will come when they're called. They can also learn many other words, such as "treat" and "banana" (a favorite with many rats). Rats are also smart enough to learn a variety of tricks. Some rats can be litter-box trained . . . rats are social butterflies who love to be with people and beg to come out of their cage to play or be petted."

I can attest to the cute side of rats. Back when I was attending a formerly august finishing school, I became intimately familiar with rats. The school was involved in research on obesity, apparently in the hopes that no alumna would ever again have to step into an aerobics studio. A zaftig professor was genetically engineering fat rats and was putting them through their biological paces and comparing them with a control group of naturally slim rats. My girlfriend at the time got a work-study job cleaning rat cages, and, being the horny dog I was, I followed suit.

Our job consisted of feeding rats, cleaning cages and water bottles, and disposing of dead and occasionally partially eaten dead rats. My experience became more intimate, though.

³ I'm not sure if Richard Gere was consulted for this poll.

My girlfriend, who as far I was able to tell was not actually genetically engineered to be fat but who shared certain of the moral characteristics of her charges, grew enamored of the rats, and proceeded to lift one of the control rats.

The problem was, as we were soon to discover, it wasn't one of the control rats, but one of the obese rodents. Within a few weeks, we had a pet about the size of a McDonald's hamburger. Still, the rat grew on me, and when my squeeze went abroad to explore the great books and small men of Europe, I spent months with the rat. I still have a blanket with a hole chewed in it to show for the relationship (with the rat that is).

Alas, the animal's life did not end well. She died in a bowling bag on a bus going back to campus, the victim of a heat stroke. I knew the bus wouldn't let me on with her, so I attempted to hide her in a bag with the top wide open. It was too much though. It was a sad Punto who tossed his dead rat into a Dumpster that day.

So our old enemy has ironically become a great friend. Perhaps in part because they knew no one would object to folks prodding and shooting rats up with strange drugs, scientists could rely on rats as research fodder for years. Peoples' lives are now being saved by the animal who had been known only for death and disease in ages past.

Now that we've cleaned them up and put them in our labs, we're falling in love with their little pink noses and beady eyes, soppy sentimental bastards that we are. Rats will always win.

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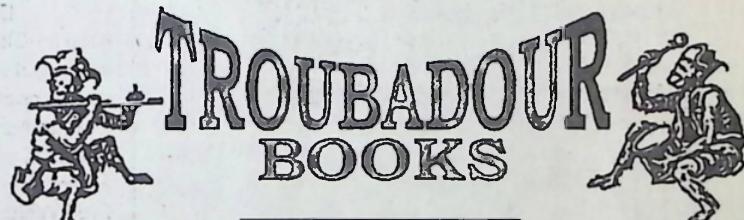
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I stood outside in the rain for a few minutes before Matt answered the door.

"Why invite me to your house if you're not going to let me in," I said.

"Whatever. I wanted to make sure it was you," he said.

Matt was a wreck. It was obvious he hadn't slept in days. His eyes looked like they had been patched with black putty.

"C'mon in," his voice cracked. "I think I'm in trouble."

I walked into the farm house. "Do you have anything to drink?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's out on the porch, c'mon," he said. We walked out onto the big enclosed porch that wrapped around three-quarters of the house. A bunch of window screens had big holes punched out of them and the air smelled of gunfire. There was a half-full whiskey bottle on a table covered with pot stems. On the floor by the table was a big shotgun with a scope duct-taped to its double-barrel.

"I had him in my sights, man, but I didn't hit him. I fired and the blast jerked me backwards and then the other barrel fired." Matt's excited words explained in part the message he left three hours ago on my answering machine but I still didn't fully understand why he had not already been arrested.

I drank some whiskey, gagged, and washed it down with beer. I picked up the shotgun and looked at the

scope. "Where did you get this?" I asked.

"It's a nightscope. It came in the mail a couple of days ago," he said. "It

was necessary. He only comes out at night."

I knew what Matt was up to and I knew what he did. For the past month he had been leaving sporadic messages on my answering machine complaining about a coyote that was eating his chickens. Matt only calls me when he needs help. He turns into a big pussy when the slightest thing goes wrong. Once he left a message on my machine about how he had been shitting in the woods for the past week because his toilet was backed up. I brought him a plunger and stayed with him for a week. I like Matt and I don't mind helping him out. He lives on a small farm in a farmhouse with plenty of room. The unspoken deal is that when Matt has a problem I'll help him in exchange for a couple of days stay at his place. And he always has plenty of beer and liquor and marijuana that he grows out in the woods on the edge of his five-acre farm. It's a place to get away and rest.

The coyote obviously screwed Matt's head. He's a tree-hugging-liberal-hippie-freak and I was surprised when

Matt left a message saying he shot-up the neighbor's house.

I picked the gun up off the floor and pointed it out one of the holes. I peered through the nightscope and checked out the landscape.

"Ahh, I see your problem," I said.

"Is it bad?" he shuddered.

I was looking at a house sitting on a hill about three hundred yards away. "It looks like a shark took a big bite out of the corner of the house. Who lives there?"

"A couple of teachers from New York City. It's their summer home I think, they just moved in a couple of weeks ago," he said.

"There are no lights on. I wouldn't worry about it. They probably think lightning hit their house," I said.

"You think so?" he hoped out loud.

"Yeah. They probably giggled themselves pink about the whole thing. I'm sure they'll be on the phone tomorrow with their friends bragging about how charming country living is," I said.

"Yeah. Their screw friends will probably buy them a lightning rod from L.L.Bean as a house-warming present," Matt laughed.

Matt was potentially in big trouble but he was lucky. His neighbors probably weren't home. But once they saw that huge bite in their house they

weren't going to think lightning. They might not figure it out right away, but whoever they pay to fix it will know it was from a shotgun blast. But he was calm now, and that was important. Matt walked into the house and came out with two beers and two glasses filled with ice. He poured the rest of the whiskey. "Drink?" he said.

It wasn't even midnight yet. "The night's very young, Matthew," I said. "I hope you have more whiskey."

He smiled.

"How long have you been up?" I asked.

"I've been on this porch for two days waiting for him," he said.

I wanted to know where Matt's mind was at. "Why didn't you just set some traps out in the yard?"

"Traps don't kill 'em, they just catch 'em," he said.

"Yeah but you just fired this monster gun at the fucking thing," I said. He did not answer.

Matt's brain was obviously dangling from a frayed

rope. I had brought some books about coyotes with me and I was eager to do some research. I wanted to fix this situation as soon as possible. I came up there to smoke Matt's fine weed and take long walks in the woods. Maybe try my

hand at writing some pastoral poetry. I would not be able to do anything until I restored order. And it was still possible that state troopers could show up at any moment and haul Matt away.

"Matt.

Just to be on the safe side, why don't you go bury that gun out in the back-yard, and fix the screens. We have a lot of work ahead of us and we won't have time to answer any crazy questions," I said.

Matt understood. I found a big chair on the porch and settled in with a new bottle of whiskey. What I learned about coyotes that night would lead us down a strange culinary path later that week.

I woke up in the big chair at dawn. Matt

was sleeping on the floor. He was covered in dirt and the screens were replaced. Half the whiskey was still in the bottle. I took a swig from it. There



Dogboy, painting by Dave Tischler

was no chaser within arm's reach so I sat in the big chair squinting for a few moments. I stretched my leg towards Matt and rolled him over with the toe of my boot.

"Did you get him?" he asked.

"No Matt, but I have a general understanding of these animals now. Go make breakfast while I figure out a plan," I said.

I was out on the porch drawing up a personality profile of this beast that was fucking with Matt. Matt brought out a bowl of hard-boiled eggs and a stack of buttered wheat toast. He ran back into the kitchen and came back out with a pitcher of bloody marys and big glasses filled with ice.

"What's the deal?" he asked.

"Well let me start from the beginning." I took a long sideways sip from my bloody mary. "The coyote is a low-energy predator and a scavenger. Actually the dog we are dealing with is an Eastern coyote. It looks like a skinny german shepard and has a face that most resembles a fox."

"That seems about right," Matt said. "Please tell me more."

I decided to give Matt a little background information." The eastern coyote is related to the mid-west coyote. Biologists assume that before the plains of the mid-west were settled coyotes fed off the remains of the kill of other animals, or even maybe hunted buffalo or elk in packs. Like the way wolves hunt, striking at the young and the sick. But no one knows for sure because no one gave a shit back then. After the buffalo was eradicated and all the game fled to the woods, coyotes concentrated on ground squirrels and field mice." I took another big sip from my drink and motioned my head towards Matt's bong. He packed the bowl, lit it, and inhaled deeply. He passed it to me.

"So there were no coyotes around here back then?" he asked, exhaling a thick cloud of sweet smoke indicative of some hybrid he harvested last fall.

"Exactly," I countered with a plume of my own smoke." They were only found on the western plains, but that situation soon changed. The coyote adapts very quickly to any changes in its environment and if things get too brutal it finds a new environment to live in. Anyways, I'm getting ahead of myself. In the 1800's ranchers and farmers moved into the mid-west. With all the livestock roaming around coyotes could not resist including sheep and calves into their diet." My head was getting foggy: Matt's pot was a little too good. "So coyotes started eating livestock. This irritated ranchers so they started shooting them, trapping them, leaving out poison bait, etc. Once coyotes started seeing their kind getting captured in traps baited with previously killed livestock and seeing others die from eating poisoned carcass-bait they became suspicious. See before they would kill a sheep, eat what they could and return to it another time for another feeding. They only weigh about 40 pounds so a sheep is good for a couple of feedings by a few coyotes. But the smart ones became suspicious of previously-killed food. Coyotes, adapted by only eating livestock they killed

themselves and they would not feed on it when they returned. Instead they would just play it safe by killing another sheep; which means more livestock was now being preyed upon by coyotes." I looked at Matt to see if had any questions.

"What about chickens?" he asked.

"Not yet," I said. This sounded like it was going to get complicated. I realized I was telling him a lot of useless information. All he wanted was action. I thought of digging up the gun and doing the job myself, but that was out of the question now. At that moment, we heard a car wind up the road to the house that Matt assaulted last night. It seemed clear that the last thing to do was roam the woods with a shotgun four months before the start of hunting season. Matt was stoned and he seemed to be engrossed in the story, so I continued.

"Are you following me?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Please. I want to know everything," he said.

I bit into a celery stalk and fished a beer out of the cooler. "Around 1915 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service enacted Operation Animal Damage Control in about 16 mid-west states. It was a massive campaign, not to wipe out the coyote but to cut back the population. They rained shotgun blast down upon coyotes from helicopters and airplanes. They lured them into firing lines with wild animal calls, where sharpshooters picked them off."

Matt was getting into

it now. I started waving my arms in the air and crept around the porch like a vulture. I had to. I was getting seriously bored and disinterested with the whole story. I felt like I was giving an oral book report. I jumped onto the table and began violently shaking a full beer over my head.

"You know what Matt, the coyote never blinked. When a coyote population starts to thin out the female gives birth to bigger litters. Before Operation A.D.C. the female would give birth to four or five cute little puppies. Her and the male would raise them over the summer showing them the joys of pastoral living. But when the coyote population in the mid-west started to thin, females gave birth to bigger litters. Maybe ten at a time. They would raise the pups teaching them the tricks on how to survive Operation A.D.C. But Uncle Sam also had an answer." I could feel the aluminum can expanding in my hand. "The answer was denning. It was a seek and destroy mission where agents of the Fish and Wildlife Service would lob exploding cartridges of poisonous gas into pup dens."

I threw the can of beer at Matt. It exploded spraying beer all over him. His eyes were puffy little slits incapable of showing surprise. He slid his ass across the floor into a corner and fixed his stoned little face on me. He was protecting his back. I had no plans to blindside him but instinct drew him into the corner. I lost my train of thought. I hopped off the table and sat next to Matt.

"Anyways, people think the coyote migrated because of Operation A.D.C. The operation documented four million coyote kills between 1915 and 1980. Around 1930 people in this area started to notice the signs of the coyote's presence: dead sheep with their throats discretely bitten; lambs with their heads crushed; and yes Matt -- chickens started to disappear. Not just in New England but everywhere. Now, coyote populations range from Central America to the most Northern point in Alaska and all the way back across the continent into your backyard."

"So there is more than one coyote out there eating my chickens," said Matt.

"Exactly. If we kill one, another will just take its place," I said. "There is probably a coyote family out there feeding your chickens to its young." Neither of us were in the mood for an all-out assault. Besides we didn't have the time or the resources.

"Let's go down to the bar and plan out a strategy. I have a few ideas that could work."

We brought the rest of the eggs with us to the V.F.W. in town. We ate them on bar-crackers and offered them to the regulars and in return they bought us dollar drafts.

Matt's shotgun brought back a lot of good memories, but the vicious hangover that is raking my brain prevents me from telling anymore of this tale. Read the climactic conclusion next month.

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On the Existence of Mountain Lions in Western Massachusetts

by G. Michael Dobbs

I know for sure of just four definite mountain lion manifestations in western Massachusetts. The first two are in the Zoo at Forest Park, both former pets of some well-meaning but dumb wildlife lovers.

The third is a metal statue perched life-like along Colrain Road between Shelburne and Colrain. The black metal work of art is cleverly designed to be seen just at the edges of your peripheral vision and therefore raise some considerable gooseflesh.

The last manifestation of the mountain lion here, of course, can be found in any tavern with the good sense to offer Catamount Beer among its offerings.

Of course, I'm playing the jester here with a serious subject. The mountain lion (or cougar, puma, painter, or catamount) was traditionally thought of as being eradicated by Massachusetts hunters by 1886. However in the last twenty years or so, more and more hunters, farmers, hikers, and fishermen have reported seeing mountain lions. Biologists have collected hair samples, taken photos of where the cats allegedly slept or scratched, and have made plaster casts of their tracks. Yet no clear photo or video has been taken nor has one of the big cats been captured. State wildlife officials have repeatedly refused to confirm or deny the existence of the eastern cougar here due to lack of definitive evidence.

Many people would balk at putting cougar in the same category as the monster in Lake Champlain or Bigfoot, and yet the case of the puma is being treated almost the same way by authorities. It doesn't matter how many sightings can be recorded -- until a cougar is struck by a car or a carcass is discovered in the woods, wildlife authorities continue their wait-and-see attitude.

The eastern cougar is acknowledged by biologists as having a habitat that stretches from the Canadian border as far east as Tennessee and as far south as South Carolina. Naturally, puma are well established in the far western states, and Florida has its own species of panther living in its marshes and swamps. The eastern cougar is protected under the Endangered Species Act, and killing a mountain lion carries with it a \$10,000. fine.

According to a report in 1995 by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, over 30 sightings of mountain lion were made in Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and even in highly populated Hampden County, over a four-year period. Scoffers might say that people were mistaking bobcat with their larger cousin, and some have suggested that a garden variety tabby when spotted under the right conditions might make some people think they've seen a puma.

There are some interesting facts to consider, though, about the return of wildlife to the Pioneer Valley. Who would have thought moose would have been sighted within the city limits of Springfield? And yet, there have been highly publicized sightings. What about the rise in the bear population? Several years back a bear in a Northampton condo project made front page news. Some well-meaning city boy thought the poor bear



The Puma's Blues

needed some food and was handing it some crackers, much to the dismay of police officers and game wardens.

The black bear is just one of the success stories in western Massachusetts wildlife. Thanks to conservation of forest land, animals traditionally thought to be on the edge of survival here have come back in a big way.

Consider the humble beaver. It seems that at least two or three times each year there are stories in the local press about some townspeople tearing out their hair because beaver dams have flooded their property. That beavers have, in some people's eyes, become a nuisance, is remarkable considering the beaver had been extinct in the state for 150 years until their re-introduction in 1932. Bald eagles, coyote, and wild turkeys are also animals which have made spectacular comebacks.

So why not the mountain lion?

There are several area amateur biologists who've kept track of sightings, casts, and photos. Virginia Otis of Goshen has been quoted frequently about the number of people who've seen cougar or their tracks. Another area researcher, Virginia Fifeld received a grant to study the reports of the great cats. Still no one has delivered a body which is the only evidence that will satisfy the scientific and wildlife control authorities.

This last winter my wife called excitedly to me to look out into our back yard. Our three dogs were at the rear windows barking furiously at a huge bird which was calmly sitting on the top of a pile of snow-covered leaves. It was a red-tailed hawk which had settled on the ground to eat a freshly-killed pigeon. The bird heard me open the door to my back porch and majestically took off with the pigeon carcass firmly grasped in one talon. I live in Springfield, less than a half-mile from the downtown center.

Accept it or not the wildlife of western Massachusetts is flourishing and adapting and making itself known to us. It's just a matter of time before the eastern cougar is officially acknowledged. It's just a pity one has to die in order for this event to happen.

At one time, men and women in the Connecticut River Valley marked their days with the passing of great flocks of Passenger Pigeons, often moving in numbers so vast that they darkened the skies. Vast, too, were the flocks of Eskimo Curlews migrating overhead. Heath Hens were plentiful, and so common on the dinner table that many tired of the meal.

Boys and old men measured their leisure days by their catches, yanked from clean, clear rivers and stream. The Connecticut River and its tributaries were rich with native Salmon, Shad, Brown Trout, and others, providing ample meals for families boasting talented anglers of any and all ages.

By night, the cacophony of the shrieking Passenger Pigeons died down. The nights were much darker then, pierced by the howl of the Wolf or the infrequent cough of the prowling Catamount, local predators which long ago lent teeth to children's nighttime fears and ominous old wives' tales.

Gone, all gone, today. As people asserted their dominion over the Valley as hunters, fishermen, dam-builders, and industrialists, each generation forged its own revolution — industrial, technological, and so on — reshaping the flora and fauna they lived with. In time, some ceased to live with us at all, and others less fortunate ceased to exist altogether.

The Passenger Pigeon

Ed Metcalfe runs the Southern Vermont Natural History Museum on Hogback Mountain in Marlboro, Vermont. Perched alongside Route 9's panoramic "100-mile view," the Museum opened this spring, built around the extraordinary wildlife taxidermy mounts assembled by Luman Nelson (1874-1966), a collection amassed and prepared from the turn of the century through the early 1960s.

Among Nelson's collection of about 500 birds and 20 mammals handsomely prepared in over a hundred dioramas are three extinct bird species: the Passenger Pigeon, the Eskimo Curlew, and the Heath Hen. They are exquisite specimens, rare in their beauty, tragic testimonials to man's ability to purge the most plentiful of God's creatures from the face of the Earth.

It's extraordinary to see a Passenger Pigeon in any collection in this day and age. These remarkable birds once flourished on the North American continent in almost inconceivable numbers. The

these nests. The parents would go out for an extended period of time; they weren't going back and forth like you think of a robin doing. They'd fly away for the better part of the day, leaving their chicks. The way they evolved, their protection was in sheer numbers. No matter what predator could get to them, and no matter how easily they could get them, their protection was in their numbers: the fact that there were millions and millions of them. There was no predator that could possibly deplete this population at any one time, and there were quite a few of these flocks

NEVERMORE

famous ornithologist and artist John James Audubon wrote about their mind-boggling numbers and speed (which Audubon estimated to be an average of one mile a minute, passing "like a thought") and described in horrific detail the mass slaughter of a flock in his seminal volume, *The Birds of America* (The Macmillan Company, 1937). When asked about the Passenger Pigeon in the Nelson collection, Metcalfe notes that, like the Eskimo Curlew (see below), they "were probably the most common and prolific birds there were, and there were millions and millions of them. In some of the old accounts, they say that when the flocks flew over, the skies were dark, and they estimated there were many, many tens of millions in these flocks. It makes you wonder how they could feed themselves. When they nested, they tended to nest altogether, which (I'll mention) had to do with their demise."

"They would nest in areas that were a mile wide and six miles long, like in a long strip," Metcalfe tells us. "There would be millions and millions and millions of birds all next to each other in the trees in

around the Eastern United States." Passenger Pigeons were still abundant in the 1860's, though by that time the massive butchery of entire flocks were beginning to take a toll. "The flocks were shot for the market," Metcalfe explains. "Really, the only meat you got off them were two half-way decent size chunks of breast meat. The stories were that they would just fill up train-car loads of them, packed in ice. They'd go out and scatter shot, shoot into the trees and take them down by the hundreds and thousands. They really decimated the population." Between 1867 and 1878, a few states (including Massachusetts) passed laws prohibiting the slaughter of the birds, but the damage had already been done.

"When the population got down to the tens of thousands of birds, there was one story that one of the few large flocks left was lost in a storm over one of the Great Lakes," Metcalfe sadly recalls. "In the end, what was the real demise of the birds was that they needed to see the other million birds around them nesting, or getting ready to nest, to trigger the whole nesting instinct. When they were

down to a few thousand birds, they just didn't want to nest anymore. That instinct to nest — the trigger wasn't there, and they just stopped nesting. They weren't a long-lived bird, unless they were kept in captivity, and they died off pretty quickly." The last wild specimen was captured in the fall of 1899 in Wisconsin. "There was one in a zoo out in the midwest that lived for a few years in the early 1900s," Metcalfe concludes.

Her name was Martha, and she quietly lived out her days in the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens. With her final breath on September 1, 1914, her kind ceased to exist.

The Eskimo Curlew

The cinnamon-colored Eskimo Curlew was a shore bird, a little over a foot long and at one time a highly-valued eating bird that earned the nickname "Doughbird" (according to Roy Pinney, "the killed bird literally burst open like freshly baked bread when it struck the ground;" quoted from *Vanishing Wildlife*, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1963, page 92). Metcalfe notes that "they were very, very common over the shore, and I think to a lesser extent this far inland. They migrated by the millions." The Eskimo Curlew's migratory routes spanned over 2500 miles, from the Gulf of Mexico to their breeding turf in Labrador. Though they still proliferated through 1870, by 1894 but a single bird was reportedly for sale in the Boston Market, where once thousands were sold.

"Again, it's a bird that was hunted in masses for its meat, and it was a bird that moved in flocks of tens of thousands," Metcalfe tells us. "I don't think it was a real skittish bird. It wasn't hard to approach them — I think passenger pigeons were that way, too — I think they were fairly easy to approach." Indeed, they were slaughtered by night (clubbed to death on their roosting sites by the thousands) and day (easily shot

from the skies en masse), filling wagons during their spring and fall migration seasons. "People considered them stupid, but it's one of those birds again whose sheer numbers were its main defense against depletion of the species," Metcalfe argues. "No normal natural predator could possibly have affected the numbers of them, until man came along, of course, with guns. The mass market for them, and the large numbers of them, were gone shortly after the turn of the century.

"I believe that they hung on for a long time in smaller populations, and I'm not sure that they are totally extinct. It depends on what book you read. I've heard that there are some around Hudson's Bay, but whether those reports are from the 1960s or more recently, I haven't determined yet."

The Heath Hen

Reference books tell us that the only remaining stuffed specimen of a Heath Hen is on display in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, but it just ain't so.

Of all the Southern Vermont Natural History Museum's specimens, the Heath Hen mount is the least life-like. Where the other specimens are frozen in naturalistic positions amid sketchy environmental recreations, the Heath Hen is ingloriously hung from its feet like the gamebird it once was, its feathers ruffled, its beak partially open, its eyes closed. The tag on its leg is turned away from the viewer, and the ink has faded into near-invisibility. Prey to man, cats, and dogs, its eggs and chicks vulnerable to tractors and mowers, the Heath Hen was soon hunted into extinction. Looking at the museum's display, one cannot help but wonder how this individual specimen's death figured in the countdown of the species.

"The Heath Hen was very much like the Prairie Chicken out west, a very similar-looking bird, a

definite subspecies," Metcalfe explains. "It was very, very isolated geographically, whereas the Prairie Chicken was out as far as the mid-west. The Heath Hen was originally in the Atlantic states and southern New England; I think this was probably the edge of its range, where we are now in Southern Vermont, and on over towards the shore, up to the coast of Maine. It was all congregated along the Connecticut and Massachusetts shore."

Like the Passenger Pigeon and the Eskimo Curlew, however, the Heath Hen was soon history. "It had been wiped out of most of those areas of the Atlantic states very early," Metcalfe continues. Some states passed laws to protect the species as a basic food source; among these was a 1791 New York State law protecting Heath Hens during spring and summer seasons, but hunters continued bagging hens. By 1867, the Heath Hen had vanished from the Massachusetts' mainland; by 1870, New York's hen population had been depleted. "In the coastal areas, by the mid-1880s it was pretty well wiped out."

According to Metcalfe, a valiant bid to salvage the Heath Hen population nearly succeeded, save for one grave error. "There was a fairly viable population out of Martha's Vineyard, but that had gotten depleted too over the years," Metcalfe calmly relates. In 1908, "the state stepped in and was doing a very good job of bringing it back, and got the population up to a couple of thousand birds in Martha's Vineyard. The one big mistake they made was they were all in one place."

After eight years and a budget of \$70,000, the Massachusetts State Department of Conservation had nurtured the Heath Hen population from 100 to 2000. Then, in 1916, disaster struck. "Brush fires decimated the habitat and killed a lot of the birds." Of the 105 surviving hens, precious few were female. "They just couldn't do anything with them. It was a

punco godyn asks:

CAN YOUR HEARTS STAND THE TERROR OF THE MUMMY CATS OF MONHEGAN ISLAND?

"It looks like these dudes died of distemper."

Nine-year-old Kyle Murdock is talking to me about one of the more obscure horrors of New England which is fast becoming a watchword of the weird, namely his collection of mummified cats.

We're at Monhegan Island, a tiny outcropping of rock basking some ten miles off the coast of Maine. Though a rough and austere place to spend the winter, Monhegan has become the haunt of visitors every summer. Residents of Northampton know the drill: you live in a place that isn't horrible, and every year you find yourself stumbling over piles of slack-jawed tourists.

But in May, there's still not much of anything open yet for the big tourist crowd, and the big reason to come is because the island serves as a "trap" for migrating birds of many a stripe. For the Hampshire Bird Club, Monhegan is their big spring excursion.

Monhegan, the stuff of dynamic paintings and sunset strolls, is not the kind of place you come to expecting any kind of sideshow treats. Until you pass Kyle on the main road with his lemonade stand, promising a view of the cats for a mere 50 cents.

As Kyle tells the story — and his mother warns that he embellishes the story a little more every year — family members were fixing up his aunt's house, one of about fifty homes on the island, and dug up a base board. Underneath they found these freeze-dried kitties, their eyeless faces and ragged claws frozen in some terrible paroxysm of pain or terror. Mrs. Murdock tells me it's likely the cats belonged to a former resident of the home, and that the cats went under the house to die, possibly of distemper, decades ago. The house is more than 50 years old, and was the home of a "cat lady" at one time.

Kyle has much cooler parents than I do, because they immediately thought of him when they found the cats, and let him keep them. In a box in the shed, of course.

"The flies don't eat 'em, because they are preserved," he says.

The cat is surprisingly light and leathery in my hand. It has nothing resembling fur, thank God, just a mud-colored hide stretched tight over the splay of bones. Looking at its fangs I can imagine the sound it would make, looking like this.

We take photographs of the cats, on the promise we won't publish them.

"Don't release them into the public," Kyle warns. "That's my living, you know."

I imagine great things happening for this kid. Or at least incredibly weird things.

twisted illo by Attaboy!



shame because they were probably really very close to a stage where they could have started to move them around, maybe build up other populations — but they lost those."

The last Heath Hen died on March 11, 1932. The possibilities of using an infusion of Prairie Chicken species to reinvigorate the dwindling Heath Hen population apparently was never explored. "I think the Heath Hens were a grassland bird, just like the western ones are, but there were some were some distinct differences in their habits," Metcalfe recalls. "I don't know why (unless they just felt it wasn't right) they didn't try to introduce the western species, being as they're an almost identical bird. I don't know if they would have adapted to this habitat, anyway. I think this eastern subspecies was really quite adapted to the area."

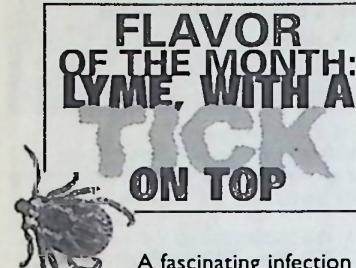
Sitting in the museum, gazing out the back windows over a majestic view of Vermont and Massachusetts that undoubtably was once home for the Passenger Pigeon, Heath Hen, and Eskimo Curlew, Metcalfe pauses for a moment. "One has to wonder these days," he quietly says, "with Jurassic Park out there, if we couldn't clone them from the specimens that are left. Perhaps they could produce something, who knows. Maybe somebody will find a way to make a few hundred of them in a lab." His eyes sparkle with the possibilities. Looking out over the expansive forest, one cannot help but share Metcalfe's fantasy. With the genetic material housed among the museum's own rare taxidermy specimens downstairs, one indeed ponders, what if...?

And later that night, I dream of it: the skies dark with their numbers, my children looking up at them in awe and wonder.

(For information and directions to the Southern Vermont Natural History Museum, call (802) 464-0048 or write P.O. Box One, Jacksonville, VT 05342.)

THE NURSE IS IN

JESSICA
FALLER-
BERGER,
RN



(The information presented in this article is for educational purposes only. Please see your physician regarding diagnosis and treatment of Lyme or any illness. The views of the writer do not necessarily reflect those of the ANA.)

A fascinating infection for more reasons than one, you could call Lyme disease the mysterious little sister of Syphilis. Like Syphilis, Lyme disease is caused by a spiral-shaped bacteria classified as a spirochete. The initial signs of both Syphilis and Lyme manifest as skin lesions. The former disease commences as a genital chancre while the latter begins as a bull's-eye rash. Like the spirochete that causes Syphilis (*Treponema pallidum*) the bacteria that causes Lyme (*Borrelia burgdorferi*) has a penchant for saddling up to the nervous system. Left untreated, both diseases can result in secondary skin lesions, heart failure, blindness, and neurological disorders. Therein, morphology recapitulates pathology. Think of these two corkscrew-shaped bacteria as invisible Black & Decker drills boring their way slowly but surely inward. While microscopic invasion occurs, the untreated pathological changes may inflict considerable pain. Fortunately, Syphilis can be diagnosed with a routine Rapid Plasma Reagin test. But unlike Syphilis, Lyme disease is tricky to diagnose. Maladies most commonly associated with Lyme include chronic arthritis, meningitis, and congestive heart failure. The actual course of the illness may be extremely complex. Fortunately, protecting yourself from contracting this disease is quite simple. Moreover, since Lyme disease is often misdiagnosed, your very best defense is prevention.

Now, you may be asking yourself, how likely is it that I'll catch Lyme disease if I don't take any precautions? Is it really worth the hassle? According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Lyme cases continue to rise in Massachusetts, warranting an urgent need for "public education, improved surveillance, and effective policy..." (Mass. Dept. of Public Health, *Communicable Disease Update, Lyme Disease Advisory Committee* [Vol.6, No.2, Spring, 1998]). Indeed, more than 99,000 cases of Lyme have been diagnosed since 1982, a 32-fold increase in the last 16 years. This nation's 1975 birthplace of Lyme disease, Lyme, Connecticut is bloated with the blight. Some towns report 1000 cases per 100,000 residents. Disease rates continue to skyrocket at a furious rate. And this humdrum household name, Lyme disease, has a humdinger of an effect.

HISTORY / ASSOCIATED ILLNESS

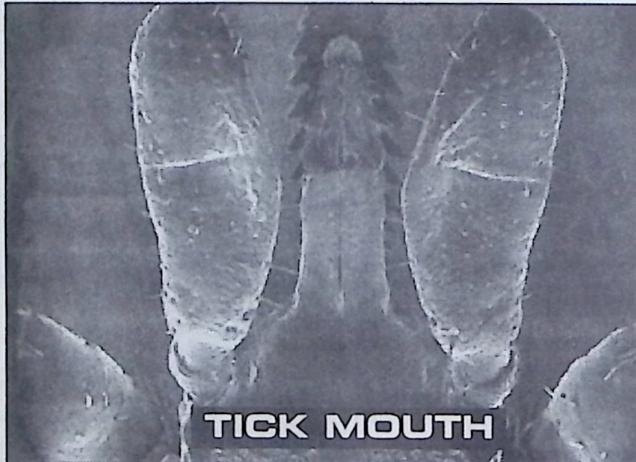
Lyme disease transmission typically evokes images of the wilderness, whereby Davy Crockett-types acquire their infection from the deer tick. It is true that deer ticks harbor the etiological agent of Lyme disease, the spirochete *Borrelia burgdorferi*. However, disease transmission is not limited to rural and suburban areas. Indeed, "Lyme disease can occur in wooded urban areas as well as rural areas if ticks and their hosts are present" (Daniels, Falco, Schwartz, Varde & Robbins, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 3.3 [1997]). Daniels et al discovered that white-footed mice host the tick, *Ixodes scapularis*. One might conclude then, that rodent infestation may be at the heart of urban Lyme disease.

Very well then. We know what causes Lyme disease.

We know that you can contract Lyme in the city or in the country. And we've seen how Lyme is similar to Syphilis. But what exactly is Lyme disease?

According to

the East Norfolk Health Authority, "Lyme disease is a multi-system illness which may affect the skin, nervous system, joints, and heart. It can be divided into three clinical stages. Not all stages



need appear, and the clinical stages may overlap" (1997). Monahan et al portray Lyme as a "chronic inflammatory disease transmitted by a tick bite." These authors identify the bear/deer tick, *Ixodes dammini* as *Borrelia burgdorferi*'s primary vector. However, a variety of ticks may transmit the disease. This tick variegation is a crucial point. Ticks known to transport the sordid *Borrelia burgdorferi* include: *Ixodes pacificus* (Western States); *Ixodes ricinus* (Great Britain); *Ixodes dammini*, *Ixodes scapularis*, and *Amblyomma americanum*. The last three ticks mentioned work as double agents. Not content to inflict merely Lyme disease upon us lumbering mammals, they relish in their capacity to also spread Ehrlichiosis, a potentially fatal disease affecting the white blood cells. "*Ixodes dammini* is a common vector for transmission of both Lyme disease and human granulocytic ehrlichiosis" (Kolbert, Mitchell, Reed, Dumler, Bakken, Telfor & Persing, "Ixodes dammini as a potential vector of human granulocytic ehrlichiosis," *Journal of Infectious Disease* 172 [1995]).

So our double-agent ticks may be waylaying researchers who earnestly study Lyme disease. Clinicians baffled by the outcome of a patient with Lyme may unwittingly treat a person infected by two distinct pathogens. The

LYME/EHRLICHIOSIS combo may become as commonplace as the widely purveyed HIV/TB 'double trouble' campaign. Perhaps this explains why consistently effective diagnosis and treatment for Lyme disease remains elusive. Diagnosticians should consider the plausibility of concomitant illness in the tick-bitten patient, since a single tick can simultaneously transmit both *Borrelia burgdorferi* and *Ehrlichiosis*.

STAGES OF LYME DISEASE

STAGE I

Some 3 to 32 days after being bitten by an infected tick, a characteristic bull's-eye rash, *Erythema chronicum migrans* (ECM) appears. Look for a reddened circle with a clear center growing 5-20 inches in diameter. This hallmark rash usually heralds the onset of Lyme disease. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that of those infected by the US strain of *Borrelia burgdorferi*, only 70% grow the 'bullseye' (in Europe, ECM is virtually unheard of). Likewise, ECM does not necessarily arise from the bite site. Several lesions or rashes may appear at this time. Early identification of the illness decreases the likelihood of serious complications. Look for these signs and symptoms of Lyme's first stage: headache, chills, fatigue, nausea, fever, aching joints, sore throat, itching, and general malaise. When recognized swiftly, Lyme disease is readily amenable to treatment. The problem is, early symptoms mimic those of several diseases. And Studies by the Division of Vector Borne Infectious Diseases, in conjunction with the FDA and the Association of State and Territorial Public Health Laboratory Directors, have determined that "commercially available tests for Lyme disease are unreliable." For this reason, the prevention of Lyme is fundamental.

STAGE II

Borrelia burgdorferi navigates through mammalian bodies from the heart, through the nervous terrain, into the brain and finally through the joints. This interstitial voyage may occur anytime from three weeks to several months after the initial exposure. Cardiac manifestations include dysrhythmias, atrioventricular heart block, myocarditis, intraventricular conduction disturbances, bundle branch block, and congestive heart failure. Writers for the *Canadian Journal of Cardiology* state that despite the severity of these symptoms, the "overall prognosis of Lyme carditis is very good." Cardiac symptoms might be experienced as palpitations, chest discomfort, shortness of breath, and dizziness upon exercise.

Neurological abnormalities associated with the second stage of Lyme disease include but are not limited to meningitis, encephalitis, and Bell's palsy. A concerned brother posts on the internet: "My sister was recently diagnosed with Lyme. She has been experiencing back and neck pain... and was informed that there may only be 80% recovery. Most recently she has had symptoms of Bell's Palsy: numbness in her gums and one side of her face. Her state of mind is depressed and discouraged."

Subjective symptoms including numbness, tingling, prickling, burning, cutting pain or abnormal sensations on the skin. Musculoskeletal problems emerge during Stage II. The sufferer may experience joint pain (arthralgia), muscle pain (myalgia), myositis (muscle inflammation), and arthritis (joint inflammation). Other clinical manifestations include vision disorders, hepatitis, dry cough, lymphadenopathy, and testicular swelling.

STAGE III

The final result of untreated Lyme disease may be chronic organ dysfunction. Arthritis, especially of the larger joints, may plague the sufferer. In this stage, swelling and bluish-red discoloration of the hands and feet can occur. The skin wrinkles, grows slack, and wastes away. This condition is called *Acrodermatitis chronica atrophica*. A worried mother posts: "My adult daughter has Lyme... the skin on her hands and feet peel. It happened enough times and badly enough, that she has a few chronic sore places..."

Other symptoms of the third stage of Lyme include: Lyme encephalitis (inflammation of the brain); Encephalomyelitis (inflammation of the brain and spinal cord); Spastic paresis (partial paralysis with muscular rigidity); Ataxia (lack of coordination); and Myositis (inflammation of the muscle tissues).

So, by now you may be asking, Can't the ticks get by as vegetarians? Well, even if they could, they may choose not to, which is why Prevention is your gateway to success.

PREVENTING LYME DISEASE

Don't expect to see a big bloater of a tick. Ticks who cause Lyme/Ehrlichiosis grow to the size of a pinhead, a bit larger when stuffed. The good news is that the tick must be embedded for 24-48 hours before it can transmit Lyme disease. Take the time to conduct a tick search of yourself and your family/pets once indoors. Don't forget that disease-causing ticks make their abode in both city parks and country dales. Attire yourself in light-colored clothing to facilitate your tick search. For all you Goth-heads out there who would rather die than not wear black, look yourself over very well in the shower. Sources on prevention advise against walking barefoot, or wearing sandals, shorts and short sleeves. But let's be realistic. Unless you are a die-hard tick averter, that advice is difficult to follow in hot weather. The literature also recommends avoiding dense foliage. That's a great idea if you don't mind putting aside your entire life. You can easily spray the contents of a 6-ounce aerosol can of Permethrin or Deet on your clothes (not your skin). This will protect you through 5 launderings. Most importantly, check yourself for tiny ticks every day!

REMOVING THE TICK

What if you do find a tick? Physician's Plus Health Educators teach the following techniques. As close to your skin as possible, grasp the tick with a pair of tweezers and pull straight out. DON'T JERK THE TICK— you could rip his head clean off of his body. Then you'll have an alien head embedded in your skin. If this happens, do not attempt to remove the head yourself. Even though you may feel silly, visit your doctor for removal of the head. Otherwise, you run the risk of developing both Lyme disease and a local infection. If you do remove the tick intact, save him in a jar with a moist piece of tissue paper for later identification. Wash and apply antiseptic to the bite site. Lastly, watch yourself for symptoms of illness. Visit your physician promptly should symptoms emerge! With early diagnosis and treatment, Lyme disease is easily controlled.

And remember — AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION IS WORTH A POUND OF CURE!

PLAYMATES

INTERVIEW

ART) BY SALEM SALLOOM

The multinational rock legend Mike Flood has recently formed a band with two other guys: Eric Payne, bass, formerly of the Malariaans and Rock n' Dave and the Rent Party, and Jim Weeks on drums. Jim's played with Big Bang Theory and in Amy Fairchild, among others. Mike Flood has played in Brown Towel, The Fabulous Chicken Wings, Ass Happy, and The Dominoes Delivery Special, "before the cops made that illegal because everyone was speeding to our shows," he says. They describe their time playing together as "years and years but not long," and that they're "a new band."

After seeing them perform at the WW2, I thought I'd do an interview because these guys really rock. Their performance was original, high energy and totally pro. They work the audience with a tenacity rarely experienced. You don't have to try to like them — it just happens. The tunes take you through a melody of songs and freestyle instrumentals that make you feel like you're on a warm planet where you can eat and kiss anyone you want. The Playmates are totally pro and really cool looking. They'd fit in anywhere; NYC, Paris... anywhere.

If God and the record companies, the record company lawyers, agents, distributors, and producers get it together, these guys will definitely take over the rock world.

(Caution: you may find parts of this interview pessimistic and negative. These attitudes do not reflect the opinions of VMag, only the opinions of one dark and mysterious individual

named "The Penguin.")

J- This is the Playmates (with his hands Jim draws a diagram in the air) and this is the universe that surrounds it. We touch each planet in different ways — we want to do all different kinds of things, we can do commercials to make money... (Mike chimes in)

M- We want music to be the foundation of our cash-flow. We want to make money to make movies because we don't have nearly enough money to make movies, but we can make rock right now.

S- You plan on making music for other media vehicles like tv, film and interactives?

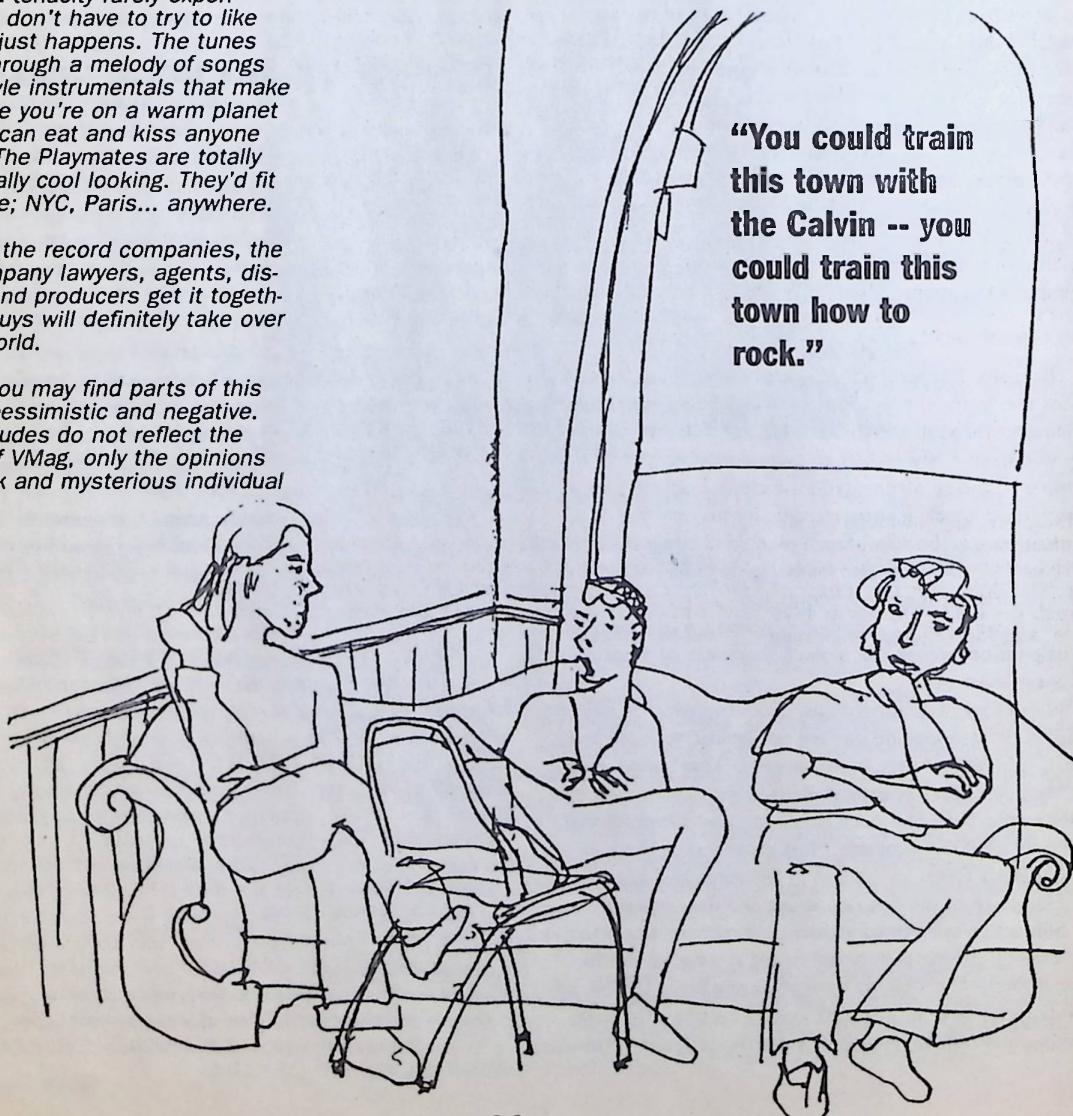
M- Everything... some of the best artists in the country right now work with the

advertising agencies

J- It's all rock-n-roll based, the whole energy comes from rock-n-roll. It's all inspired by rock-n-roll. It's already mutated into that rather than music. At some point you've served the music but once you've done that if you don't do something with it you have to play by other rules.

M- Basically, good music is good music and we all know what that is. We were talking about how Fred Astaire dances from a drummer's point of view. Just seeing him dance to the beat is an example of what people undeniably love. As humans we didn't write something down and look at it and all jump for joy, but we did bang on a drum with a stick and everybody jumped for joy. Then and still

"You could train this town with the Calvin -- you could train this town how to rock."



(L-R: JIM WEEKS, ERIC PAYNE, MIKE FLOOD)

forever we jump for joy to music. You don't show a kid a flashcard and he goes "Oh life is beautiful" and waves his hands and cries.

You know what would be nice is to just like play the music and get to make friends with other artists — people doing projects and you get to work with them. Maybe we'll go down to Washington D.C. and record with this band called Trans Am. We've noticed just now like even the way things are happening today* that the more we do for ourselves the more people will respond.

(*Mike is referring to the deal with the debut Playmates CD, *Traveller's Guide to Playtopia*, being manufactured with love by MonkeyHouse.)

S- Could you tell me a little bit about how you guys formed?

J - Eric wanted to do a band with me and then that fell apart. Mike and I had always wanted to do this but it had never really been quite right

M- (laughing) Yah, I had to practice first.

J - The whole thing happened literally overnight. Mike and I got together one day and then Eric bought a bass guitar and joined us the next day.

M- Eric just started writing music that was totally appropriate. He's a really smart guy. Really smart.

J- He's a chameleon, he can do anything.

(Eric's not around yet — he's at CVS buying L'eggs for a woman as a late Easter gift.)

S- Something very significant in the local entertainment scene is happening. Two men control most serious local venues for music. Eric Suher, the new owner of Pearl Street, the Calvin Theater and the Iron Horse, and Jordi Herold, the former owner of the Iron Horse and Suher's booking agent. How do you think this atmosphere may bode for local bands in the months to come?

J- The short answer is I think it will only benefit by either making the people who really want to play do something to get out of town and play music somewhere else besides Northampton. And it will "fill it out" for the old farts who want to go out and see the same music at the same places that are booked and owned by all the same guys. If we're serious about ourselves we'll forget about that scene and do what we need to do to get out of here. Let them do what they want because none of us (local musicians) will

work together to change it anyways. If we got hired there it will only be because we got a major record deal. That's how it always happens.

(Mike tells me that since the interview Jim's gotten a back rub and doesn't feel as negative about things anymore.)

S- Caring about the creative health of this area it's difficult for me to hear that. Colleges know a dissatisfied alumnus won't contribute back to the school they attended. Successful rock bands that received poor support from their original stomping grounds won't feel obligated to return any generosity. Places like Austin, Seattle and San Francisco are a musical success because they respect their local musicians and have institutions there which give them exposure. The A&R people go there to find artists. The A&R people won't come to Northampton to find bands they can see anywhere else in the country. This weakens the local music scene because professionally aggressive bands won't choose to base or form themselves here.

M- All this negativity here is really a result of the frustration of the artists and musicians here who would go to bat for a club owner. There are a lot of good musicians that want to support the clubs as much as they need the clubs to support them and they would be glad to show up sober and play the best possible music they can.

M- There is a chance that when they open these new clubs that they'll do it right. You could train this town with the Calvin — you could train this town how to rock.

J- Yes, there is a chance.

S- Do you see Northampton as a place for artists becoming a memory, as high rents, ice cream parlors, and trendy cafes bring in the well-paid professionals and move out the artists?

The Penguin- Let the scene die for all I care. How important is this scene to you now that you've gotten out of high school, past that there's no scene? If you're gonna stay here it retards your growth at that age forever. Like it did to me, I feel that way personally.

M- Before they put up that parking garage there were two beautiful trees there and there were lots of little scenes going on. Everyone was much more relaxed, there was strange stuff happening. There were art houses where shit was happening.

J- Now it's like you have to pay to play for your drunk friends; it's like California. We

used to pack people into Sheehan's and The Rusty Nail and get paid well. Are you a professional musician or an amateur? If you're professional you get paid, but you can't get paid around here anymore.

The Penguin- We need to get all the business owners stoned so they remember what it was like to have an artistic community.

M- We just like living here. We don't care if we get any gigs. It's pretty here even when you're not in love.

S- Do you have any thoughts about the local music community?

M- I think there are a lot of good songwriters here. I don't know about the "community." It's definitely a boy's club. I always imagine these guys walking around thinking, "Fuck you man, I'm so much better than you, I can't wait to blow you out of the water," 'cause it feels like that a lot. Recently a local musician got drunk and confessed to me that that was what they were thinking. And it relieved me, 'cause, good I always thought you were thinking that. So fuck it, I'm not even gonna think about any of that anymore, I'm just gonna play my music.

S- What is your vision for where the Playmates are headed in the future?

J- Rock in itself is fun, it's the core of everything, but it's pretty boring. I really think rock, bass and drums are coming to an end. Music won't be the same in forty years is my grand vision of things. You're either going to be deader than a dinosaur or you better be doing something fresh. Personally I want to live to do that. I think these guys feel the same way.

M- It's good singing in a facetious attitude, I feel like I can fit in with that. I feel like I've been a facetious little commentator-critic since I was a kid. I've always been hard on myself and hard on everyone else. It seems like the whole country's kinda going in that direction. Sprite has these commercials like they do. That sort of attitude is catching on and that's how we write some of our songs. We're not taking it that seriously and we're just trying to be fun smartasses. That's how it happened, so now we're really serious about playing the best possible creative music we can play. We're working on getting our music as sophisticated as we can get... very pretty and cool...

J- We're just going to have fun and be queer.

M- And that just goes to show you it's never who you know it's who you blow, and they're blowing away.

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US.

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GREEN FIELDS
OF EARLY AUTUMN
UNDER A SLATE SKY.
IN SEARCH OF THE
border

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EARTH.

It has FOUND YOU
EVEN IN THE
shadows.

DO NOT disturb WE
WHO HAVE WINGS,
and WE,
WHO FEED ON
WILDERNESS.
WE are THORNS OF WILD
ROSE.
WE are WIND
And WHITE FEATHERS.
WE are DEER.
BEAUTY FELL FROM Gods
hand.

YOU HAVE BROKEN
US
With YOUR HUMAN
EqO.

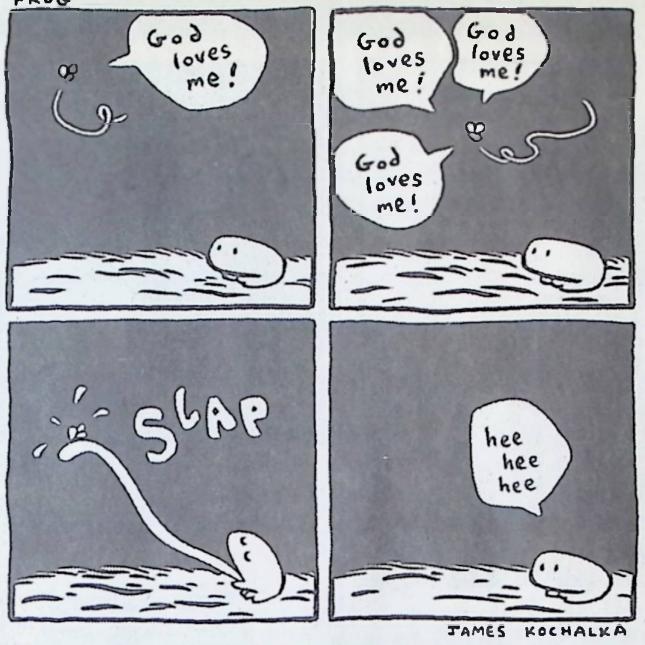
CORRINE DE WINTER



Although, now that I think about it.
the thought of making love to
Nick Cave isn't such a scary thing.
Sometimes I even imagine I'm him
when I'm at a Con or on the toilet.

Sigh,
Karl

FROG



painting by Matt Smith!

*Just
Because...*

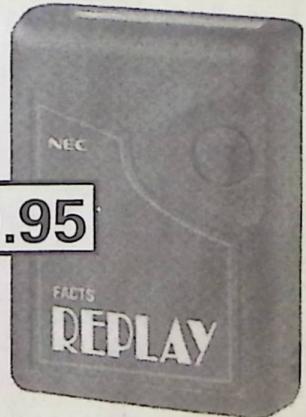
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SETTIE
I THINK TOO
MUCH
(LIZARD GROUP)

Here's a nice pop release from local artist Settie. Her playful girlish voice is a nice change from the norm, recalling Edie Brickell by way of Susanna Hoffs. The lavish orchestrations suit both the qualities of her voice and the fairly mainstream material. The production is full-blown as well, with finishing touches added at Electric Lady Studios in the Big Apple.

The standout here is the caliber of the lyrics, which are several cuts above the competition. They're both thoughtful and sincere.

Settie's sexy, kittenish delivery is perfectly complimented by multi-instrumentalist Brian Fellows' fine arrangements. The tunes mesh well, from the radio-friendly "Martini" to the powerful "Satellite" with its grand slide guitar riffs. "Vampire" builds from a somewhat quiet start to an almost deafening crescendo, with organ swells and punchy drumming from Keith Levreault. The languid "I Can't Turn You Off" follows, and is the most laid-back cut on the album. It's swooping guitar lines give it an almost spooky ambiance. "Trash" tells the story of falling hard for a guy who frequents strip bars. This one's my

favorite track here. She alternately croons and growls, and the guitars are a bit off-kilter in a engaging sort of way. "I Know A Girl" is commercial without being cloying. The bassline is almost hip-hop in nature and Fellows progresses from wha-wha to jangle and back seamlessly. Hooks are everywhere, but especially on this one, the opening track.

Consistency and impassioned performance meld into a worthy first outing for this distinctive artist. She makes a welcome addition to the Valley's ever-expanding musical community.

(Iguana Records/Lizard Group, 110 Greene St. #702, NY, NY 10012)

- Meathook Williams



MONSTER MAGNET
POWERTRIP
(A&M)

There has been some trepidation in the thinning ranks of Monster Magnet watchers of late: pre-release blurbs proclaiming a stripped down sound, the sleek radio single "Space Lord" — would Wyndorf and cohorts deliver the goods we've come to expect and need, or drop the ball...

Album opener "Crop Circle" lays waste to the doubters with an instant blast of full-on Monster Magnet sonic bliss. A less chaotic bliss — though the lyrical tapestry that Dave Wyndorf has enchanted us with is still intact: "I got an itch in my cosmic part and it won't go away" and "I started humpin' volcanoes baby when I was way too young" set the tone immediately for any newcomers unaware of the madness contained herein.

The sound and look are more metal-friendly, but the result of streamlining and polishing a serious seventies juggernaut like Monster Magnet only results in them sounding like peak-period Stooges, which is not a bad place to be.

Other highlights happily revisit the successful turf of the past: "Bummer" (neatly coopting Hawkwind's "Time We Left This World Today"), "Tractor" (a re-recorded tune from their rare debut German EP), and "Your Lies Become You" (the now-obligatory acoustic album closer).

Written on the outskirts of Las Vegas, songwriter and band con-

ceptualist Dave Wyndorf resolved to write a song a day during his stay. Any similarity in songs, he explained, was due to his daily intake of viewing "naked women and people losing all their money." This, he pointed out, would lead to a certain similarity in attack.

Perhaps this stilted landscape helped define his relationship with the record industry, a theme that permeates most of the songs on this album. His impatience that this freak show hasn't cracked the market completely is evident: *"I've wasted enough time on the edge of forever, and I've paid all the dues I'm gonna pay"* ("Temple of Your Dreams").

He relates further his relationship with the industry: *"I'm never gonna work another day in my life, the gods told me to relax, and then I'm gonna get fixed up right"* ("Powertrip").

The candid explanation for the long-term fans comes quickly after: *"I used to be a dreamer just like you, and then my pocket told me what to do"* ("3rd Eye Landslide"). He continues in the same song: *"I'm suckin' love where I can — cashin' Satan's checks with my dick in my hand — I'm talkin' about a free ride... now I'm livin' on top of it."*

These frank admissions of his motives, however, haven't marred the ferocity of the Monster Magnet attack one whit. Coming on in rushes like a hit of cheap mescaline (which they frequently sing about), *Powertrip* continues to churn beyond the rim of the Magnet universe. Like a freight train full of old Hawkwind, Sabbath and Stooges records, Monster Magnet is less of a roller-coaster ride and more like a high speed multi-car train collision — leaving bystanders stunned as to what actually happened.

Although not quite up to the standards of their hallucinogenic debut *Spine of God*, this LP should get the robitussin chuggers and other army coat-clad amateur pharmacists into high gear. With the subtle undertones of bitterness that have crept

into this record, one wonders if the band is not unaware that this could be their swan song. If there is a need for an epitaph, Wyndorf has provided a fitting mantra to be shouted from rusting party vehicles across America:

"The time has come for me to kill this game, now open up and say my name: Space Lord Mutherfukka!"

- Carwreck deBangs



HAYDEN THE CLOSER I GET (OUTPOST)

LIVE AT THE IRON HORSE MUSIC HALL (JUNE 10TH, 1998)

Not that this is very important to the matter at hand, but Canadian men have (as a collective entity) got the best hair in the world. Big bushy mops of curls and locks; black, red, brown or blond. Straight or frizzy; we stand on guard for thee.

I remember as a kid coming across a photo in *National Geographic* of thirty or so of her Royal Majesty's Mounties lined at attention. Proud, rugged and ruddy in

the crisp northerly wind and not one of them without a glorious head of splendid thick hair. It's common knowledge that Northern Territory Canadian moms rub handfuls of oily reindeer fat on their grubby children's heads instead of shampoo. In some parts of Saskatchewan, a young boy's manhood is tested not only on the hockey rink; but in dating circles, where girls are strictly prohibited from going out with a boy sporting anything resembling a crewcut (the resulting compromise of Saskatchewan's buzz cut boys has thus made this region the birthplace of the "short-long" - a hairstyle since exported worldwide by the hockey boon of the early '80's). Think about it; Paul Shaffer aside, have you ever known any Canuck puckchucker that hasn't had a good thick head a' hair?

Even in comparison to his countrymen, Hayden, a Torontonian, has some damn fine hair. Shiny black and coily, the singer-songwriter's hair was the first feature noticed at the Iron Horse when he sauntered, head bowed (for full effect), on to the stage. The tiny but appreciative crowd, entranced by this humble man and his hypnotic ringlets, listened intently as Hayden began his set with several bittersweet acoustic numbers. Live, as on his second release (*The Closer I Get*), Hayden mixes country balladry similar to Neil Young (circa *Harvest*) with the irony-tainted solo projects of Dinosaur Jr.

Mid-set found Hayden switching gears. Backed by an impressively coiffured trio, he blasted out most of *Closer's* noisier moments. Tracks like the churning "Stride," "Better Off Inside," and "Trees Lounge" (written for the Steve Buscemi's flick) gained resonance and immediacy as Hayden - his hair now glistening like an otter in water - howled to match his band's blistering rock noise. After teasing the small audience for its mutely mesmerized response, the quartet closed the evening with a thunderous version of "In September" from Hayden's quirky debut, *Everything I Long For*.

Hospital, the perplexingly misnamed locals, opened with a pleasant (if not run-of-the-mill) stab at angsty/sensitive alterna-rock. It goes without saying, their hair was quite normal.

It's great to see the Iron Horse booking acts such as Hayden. Not only is the Valley in need of a venue for upcoming out-of-town talents; but in witnessing the rapt attention paid at this performance, the market seems ripe for a rarely tapped passion involving evenings spent in the company of someone with hair that's simply to die for.

- Stuart Bloomfield



MOBTOWN
CACTUS JUICE
 (MOON SKA RECORDS)

We are firmly within the third incarnation of ska, the bouncy Jamaican-born dance music. Its first and golden age took place in the early sixties in Jamaica. That era spawned the greatest manifestation of ska; the Skatalites. Their sound was received with little enthusiasm here in the U.S. at that time, however. (Some may remember "Do The Ska" sung by Annette Funicello of the Micky Mouse Club and beach movie fame. Hardly an auspicious debut.)

The second era took place in the late seventies and early 80's in the throng of the English "two-tone" subdivision of the punk movement

and featured such excellent bands as the Specials, Selector, and the English Beat.

The third is happening right now with the Mighty Bosstones, No Doubt, Sublime, and others. The epicenter of this accessible, upbeat music is L.A. (the Bosstones are, of course, from our area). Mobtown is a superb example, and their second release *Cactus Juice* bears this out.

The indispensable ingredient of ska, aside from its distinctive beat, is the horn section. Happily, Mobtown's is world class, replete with trombone and baritone sax played by Gary Heandinges and Chris Searight, respectively. This combination is killer, and combined with the Sax and clarinet of Brian Wallace and, count 'em, two trumpets, Robert Lagunas and Amy Long, is virtual ska heaven. Long is also the lead vocalist here and styles herself the "Queen of Ska." While she doesn't have the voice of say, Lorna Bennett, she does a nice job.

But in my prejudiced mind, the best ska is instrumental and there shouldn't be more than a couple of vocal numbers on the same disc. I should say, however, that one of the finest cuts here is "Remember," a vocal selection that features some outstanding double picking by guitarist Wally Caro Jr., who has his sound down pat (right up there with reggae great Chinna), and writes most of the material as well. Brad Pate handles the keyboards with authority and panache and likewise does bassist Jeff Govan. The percussion is deftly provided by drummer Alex Vargas and percussionist Pepe who also displays his prowess on the steel pans.

Overall, *Cactus Juice* is an enjoyable ska smorgasbord with latin and reggae overtones. If you enjoy massive horn sounds combined with infectious, dance floor rhythms, this will make a wonderful addition to your collection.

(*Moon Ska Records*
 POBox 1412, NY NY 10276 /
www.mobtown.com)

- Meathook Williams



MASSIVE ATTACK
MEZZANINE
 (CIRCA/VIRGIN)
TRICKY
ANGELS WITH
DIRTY FACES
 (ISLAND)

I used to smoke. For, let's see, on-and-off twelve years. On average, I went through half-a-pack of Winstons a day. Hardly a vicious habit, but come time for New Year's resolutions, I (along with God knows how many others in the world) proclaimed independence from the cancer stick.

Quitting was difficult at first, but it's been a solid three months (save a few nervous slip-ups) absent of sucking carcinogenic smoke off the end of a paper tube stuffed with burning leaves. It feels all right -- not smoking, that is. It's not that I can breathe any deeper, nor can I taste exotic flavors my once tobacco-stunned taste buds couldn't taste. I can't run up 30 flights of stairs unwinded either (who'd want to?) but it seems smoking and I became a relationship turned stale. It's not something either of us said or did to the other, it's what we didn't say or do.

In retrospect I think what was most appealing about smoking was the culture that surrounded the simple act of lightin' up -- the lifestyle of the smoker had always been the

seductive lure. Nightclubs. Mystery. Film Noir attitude. Black coffee mornings. Alcohol weekends. Matchglow faces in dark bars. And, of course, the proper soundtrack.

Granted you can smoke to just about anything (unlike rollerskating - Blondie; unlike beer chuggin' with yer buds - Beastie Boys; unlike beer chuggin' with yer buds (with girls present) - Dave Matthews Band); but after 1991, any self-respecting smoker had to have a copy of Massive Attack's *Blue Lines*; the penultimate cigarette smoking recording. I swear if you look at your speakers while playing "Five Man Army" you're bound to see smoke rising.

From Massive Attack came Tricky's solo career. Away from the rest of the Bristol collective, Tricky continued on his own musical journey to Tracheotomy City. His cigarette choked vocals on '96's *Pre-Millennium Tension* are frightening if one stops to wonder what the man might sound like if he's still recording at 60. Aging croakers Leonard Cohen and Marianne Faithfull only give a hint.

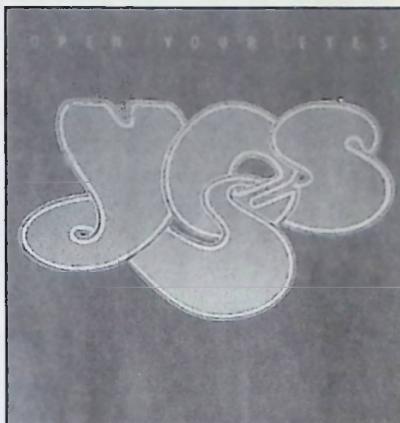
Massive and Tricky both have released discs to compete head-to-head for RJ Reynolds youth culture bucks. To my ears the 'revolutionary' sound of both acts has tired, much like my own fascination with the smoldering cigarette world. Of the two new discs, *Mezzanine* is leagues better as Massive Attack adds some unexpected twists and interesting variations to the trip-hop schtick. But "interesting" and "unexpected" doesn't equal \$13.99 (maybe \$8, if you find it used).

As for *Angels...*, Tricky comes dangerously close to self-parody. His talent may have already been played out, opting here for posturing and vague political rambling. The album quickly loses steam by the third track - the abysmal "Broken Homes" - a seriously misjudged duet with PJ Harvey.

It's sad really when a love affair ends even if it's "for the better." That sentiment goes across the board - be it between two lovers, be it

between a pack of Camels and its owner, or be it between a band and a fan.

- Stuart Bloomfield



YES OPEN YOUR EYES (BEYOND/TOMMY BOY)

Zack skated around the corner of his street, the dread in his heart increasing. He knew, of course, that his parents would both be home. His mom was kinda straight, but his dad... uh... well, his friends thought they were OK but Zack knew they were so, well — friggin' goofy. His dad reviewed records for the Springfield paper, and regarded himself as damn hip. If it wasn't bad enough that Zack had to absorb eternal grief for his skateboarding, they'd also made him get rid of all his piercings.

Now his old man was censoring what he would bring home to listen to. Ever since he'd seen his

dad snap the VOD and *Life of Agony* in front of him, Zack had settled on a compromise plan. CD's would be smuggled into the house inside innocuous-looking covers.

He entered the door quietly — "Oh, Christ, there he is..."

Zack's dad looked up from an old issue of *Crawdaddy*. "What ya got there, sport?" he asked, noticing the CD's in Zack's hand. He peered into the darkness to see...

"Hmm, Yes, *Open Your Eyes*, and *The Symphonic Pink Floyd*. That Billy Sherwood certainly has revitalized Yes, hasn't he? I mean, I had my doubts during the Buggles era, but now, whew! Four stars next Sunday, y'know?" Dad said to no one in particular, as Zack quickly exited toward his room.

Sliding the deadbolt shut, Zack tossed the Yes and Floyd onto his dresser, on top of the Pearl Jam - *Yield* and Dave Matthews - *Live* empty covers. Opening his five CD changer, he carefully loaded the new Hatebreed and Snapcase into the machine, and donned his headphones. "They should be happy I'm not a metalhead anymore," he intoned to the empty room.

Zack absently picked at the shrinking scab on his arm, until a dark crimson globe appeared, shining at the corner. Zack regarded the reflection of light in the growing orb, and chuckled to himself.

"Yup, it's decided, tomorrow's the day..."

He glanced around at the Queen, No Doubt and Bush posters his dad had bought him. Zack reclined and his eyes glassed over.

"...tomorrow, I finally will kill both of them."

- Carwreck deBangs



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BROOKS ROBARDS

M

If you live in the Valley, you don't need a movie for your walk on the wild side. You can get lost in the woods at Fitzgerald Lake inside Northampton's city limits. Moose have been known to walk down residential streets, and bears to raid backyard bird feeders. Movies, anywhere you live, are mostly indoor adventures.

Take a look at the top box office draws this season, and the only one you'll find that spent much time outdoors is Robert Redford's **THE HORSE WHISPERER**.

That movie, which didn't come close to filling theatres the way **GODZILLA** and **DEEP IMPACT** did, provides a cautionary tale about the uneasy relationship movies and our culture have with the Great Outdoors.

Based on a bestselling novel by Nicholas Evans, **THE HORSE WHISPERER** pits Manhattan Power-Mom Annie (Kristin Scott Thomas) against the original Sundance Kid (Robert Redford). It's a flat-out war between city and country lifestyles, and Redford weights the battle in favor of a sentimentalized, heal-all West.

A rustic Connecticut farmhouse provides the setting for the opening, where Annie's daughter Grace (Scarlett Johansson) wakes up to ride her horse Pilgrim. They fall victim to a terrible accident. From the start, idyllic scenes of the snow-dappled Connecticut countryside are matched with unflattering shots of Power-Mom Annie in Manhattan, jogging compulsively or wheeling and dealing in her magazine editor's offices. City ways don't have a chance.

After the accident, birdseye shots track Annie, Grace and Pilgrim as they head west in Range Rover and trailer, searching for mythic horse whisper Tom Booker (Redford). Poor Daddy (Sam Neill) is stuck at home, but what does he know? He thought a quick trip to Bermuda would fix everything.

Once the movie shifts to Montana, we are treated to every visual and narrative cliché invented by the Western. Round-ups, hoe-downs, campfires, country songs, picnics, calf-brandings, old-fashioned family life with home cooking for good measure. The best Power-Mom Annie can come up with is spaghetti sauce out of a jar. Cowboy Tom works his magic, and

the city folks (their horse, too) mend.

A few strong narrative elements and fine acting keep this over-long movie from bogging down. The horse lore is passable. The problematic relationship between mother and almost-adolescent daughter rings true, and the romance between Power-

Mom Annie and Cowboy Tom is played with a restraint that the overwrought book lacked.

Although it gets harder and harder to see beyond the celebrity image

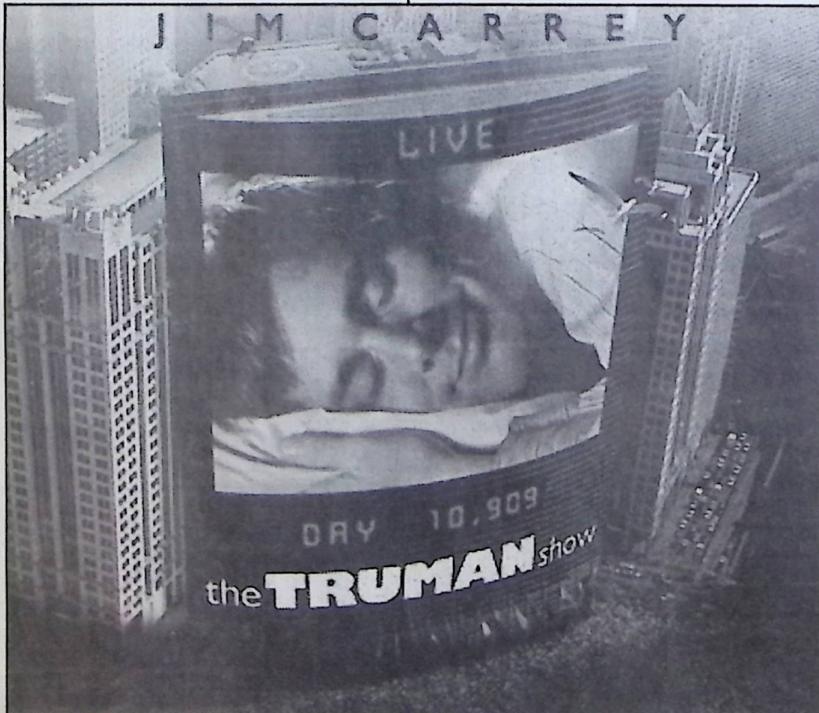
of an old warhorse like Redford, he does a decent acting job. Both Scott Thomas and Johansson bring subtlety to their roles, while Neill, Dianne Wiest—almost unrecognizable as the actress from **HANNAH AND HER SISTERS** and other vintage Woody Allen films—and Chris Cooper—late of **LONE STAR**—give substance to stick-figure roles.

Redford works hard to make us believe the West is the best, but the cinematic clichés he relies on undercut his message. Even in Connecticut sunrise is too drop-dead beautiful for its own good, and rainbows hang over the Montana horizon like happy face decals. A camera lens is a dangerous weapon around a scenic vista. Natural beauty tends to be random, chaotic, elusive. Unless used with understatement, the self-conscious camera turns natural beauty into cotton candy.

THE HORSE WHISPERER pauses too frequently for Kodak moments that are artificial, even intrusive. What made so many Westerns cinematic classics was the natural way they inhabited the American outdoors. The prairies, mountains, streams and pastures of Big Sky country were places where people lived and felt at home, not just photo ops. Too many Americans experience the outdoors from the window of a car or at a Disney-style theme park. The more adventurous try to contain the outdoors by conquering it on

snowmobiles, ATVs and mountain bikes. Few of us actually inhabit the wilderness. Granted, we live in a culture that encourages the indoor sport of tv-watching and cut our teeth on PTV's nature documentaries.

Nor is it easy to make movies about the natural world.



Hollywood tends to reduce nature to easily identified package deals. There's the family movie with its lovable animal, like *BABE* or *PAULIE*; the excursion to exotic lands, like *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*; the challenge of the elements, around this summer in a lost-on-a-desert island version, *SIX DAYS, SEVEN NIGHTS*. When movies about the natural world do work — *FLY AWAY HOME*, *MICROCOSMOS*, *NEVER CRY WOLF* are examples—the results can be breathtaking. Asian directors in particular have a knack for making the natural world compelling. Whatever failings Ang Lee's *THE ICE STORM* had, it succeeded in evoking a sense of place.

The best recent measure of how far away from Mother Earth we've gotten—and why—is Peter Weir's inspired satire, *THE TRUMAN SHOW*. Since birth, Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) has been the unknowing subject of a round-the-clock, all-live, unedited TV show engineered by the God-like producer Christof (a perfectly cast Ed Harris). Truman's world is entirely counterfeit, from its exquisite sunsets and manufactured cloudbursts to the idyllic island community of Seahaven where he lives and works with his bogus wife Meryl (Laura Linney).

Everyone in Truman's world is played by an actor; every event is an opportunity to promote a product, ranging from Mococoa cocoa to the Elk Rotary Mower. Five thousand cameras, strategically placed in garbage cans, pencil sharpeners and car dashboards, capture Truman as he innocently goes about daily life. Not until a stray kleig light accidentally drops out of the sky does Truman begin to suspect anything's amiss. Paranoia follows, and Truman sets off on an odyssey to find his true love Lauren, who turns out to be an actress named Sylvia (Natascha McElhone) apparently hustled off to Tahiti so Truman could marry

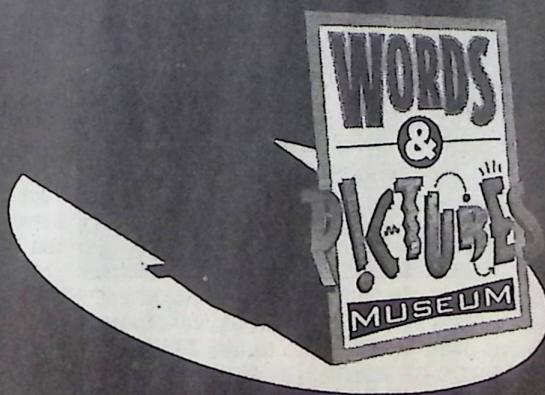
Meryl.

The brilliance of the satire lies in the way Weir uses the camera to reveal how movies enhance real life. People in Seahaven are too friendly, colors too bright, the town too well manicured, the weather too perfect. When Jim Carrey flashes that too-big smile of his, it becomes a perfect metaphor for what modern mass media have wrought. Truman steps out of his house and says to his demographically perfect neighbors, "Have a nice day, and in case I don't see you, have a good afternoon, a good evening and a good night." It's the defining moment of a career based on hyperbolizing the ordinary.

Truman lives in the wilderness of a totally artificial world. Its most ferocious beast is a dalmation. As wild as the elements get—and they do turn dangerous—they can be controlled by a computer. Director Weir does no self-righteous finger-pointing at TV (and by extension the movies). It's clear he believes we share complicity in our estrangement from the natural world—the real world. Truman comes to hate Seahaven's perfection, and he's willing to risk his life to escape. When that happens, "Truman Show" fans don't throw rotten tomatoes at their TV screens; they cheer him, then turn to each other and ask, "What else's on?"

The audience for *THE TRUMAN SHOW*, conditioned to expect another string of the empty, computer-enhanced pratfalls that Carrey is so good at, doesn't laugh a lot. They'd laugh even less if they knew the movie was shot not on a movie set, but in a hideously perfect Florida town, Seaside, that really exists. Next time a deer eats up the lilies in your backyard, say a prayer of thanks.

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Guilty Pleasures

Interesting Failures In Film Available On Video ©

BY MICHAEL CHARLES HILL

Director John Ford, in addition to making dozens of classic westerns which starred his perennially favorite actor/alter-ego, John Wayne, was one of the few directors who knew how to utilize the landscape/environment and effectively make it an uncredited "character." Witness his use of the Monument Valley in such westerns as *THE SEARCHERS*, *SHE WORE A YELLOW RIBBON*, and *STAGECOACH*.

In 1973, James William Guercio, a music composer and record producer for the band Chicago, made his directorial debut, as well as, his only film to date, one that would have made John Ford proud.

Shot in Arizona's Monument Valley by the legendary cinematographer Conrad Hall (*BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID*, *DAY OF THE LOCUSTS*, *IN COLD BLOOD*), *ELECTRA GLIDE IN BLUE* tells the story of Officer John Wintergreen, a former marine who served in the Vietnam War, played by Robert Blake (*IN COLD BLOOD*, *LOST HIGHWAY*, *TELL THEM WILLIE BOY IS HERE*), a "vertically challenged" motorcycle cop with a burning desire to become a plain-clothes detective. As he tells his slightly unhinged, comic book-loving and hippie-hating partner, "Zipper," (played by Billy Green Bush of *FIVE EASY PIECES* and *THE CULPEPPER CATTLE COMPANY*), "I hate that elephant they make me ride under my ass!"

Wintergreen unexpectedly gets his opportunity for a promotion when he deduces that the apparent suicide of a desert rat/prospector is in fact a murder and Harve Poole, captain of the homicide division (played with an ever-present cigar in his mouth by Mitchell Ryan of *THE FRIENDS OF EDDIE COYLE* and *MAGNUM FORCE*), agrees.

Donning his best western suit, his best cowboy boots, and his best Stetson hat, Wintergreen becomes Harve Poole's driver and, together, they set out to solve the murder. However, along the way, Wintergreen becomes disillusioned by his mentor's misuse/abuse of his power and authority, and of his apparent disregard for the truth (after harassing a

bunch of innocent hippies who live on a nearby commune).

And, late one night, the abrupt disclosure of Wintergreen's on-going affair with Harve Poole's mistress, the sexy waitress/barmaid, Jolene (played by the voluptuous Jeannine Riley), results in his being busted back down to the motorman division.

Wintergreen eventually solves the case when he realizes that Willie, another desert rat/prospector and close friend of the deceased (played by Elisha Cook Jr. of *CARNY*, *THE KILLING*, and *WELCOME TO HARD TIMES*), misled them in their investigation. Thus allowing Wintergreen to confront the self-important and self-absorbed Harve Poole with the truth, telling him that he was wrong all along, and to "take that cigar, the suit, and the badge, and give them to some other little mouse that will believe your horseshit."

Wintergreen climbs back onto his motorcycle and resumes "tagging" automobiles, with the knowledge that he is destined to finish his career as he started it — longing, like many a man, to prove his self-worth. But, alas, in the end, he unwittingly finds himself in a fatal encounter with the very same people he has persevered to protect.

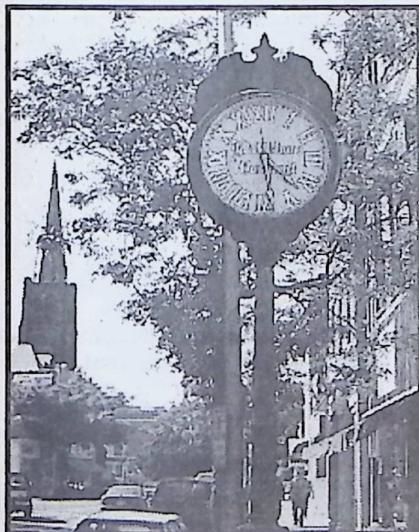
Robert Blake, who began his career with the role of Mikey in *THE LITTLE RASCALS*' featurettes, gives a heartfelt performance as a decent and honest man who appears to feel more kinship with the hippies than he does with the policemen he serves with. His portrayal of Officer Wintergreen is the embodiment of what we expect in our uniformed public servants, unlike Billy Green Bush's portrayal of Officer Davis, which is what we encounter all too often.

While *ELECTRA GLIDE IN BLUE* is dated in the same manner as *EASY RIDER* — in its depiction of the "peace-love-dope generation" — it is timeless in its depiction of mother nature's exquisite landscape, as well as the emotional landscape of a heroic man living his life in quiet desperation.



Barbie and Ken's SUPERFICIAL GUIDE TO BRATTLEBORO*

Brattleboro can be compared to the way Northampton was in the 70's. It's a rural town that, although small, has a particular association with the arts through the Marlboro Music Festival, the Vermont Jazz Center, the art galleries, craft cooperatives, and its affiliation with World Learning and the School for International Training (a college whose campus is in Brattleboro near the former home of Rudyard Kipling). You'll always see students from all over the world on the streets of Brattleboro. It has the same growing pains as any other town with a tattoo parlor next to a real estate office and some empty storefronts in the heart of town.



RESTAURANTS

There are three types of restaurants in Brattleboro. The two world-class restaurants are **Peter Havens** and **T.J. Buckley's**.

Buckley's. These two could survive anywhere as they have wonderful atmosphere, fabulous food, and service that is always the best. T.J. Buckley's is in a funky old diner on the corner of Elliot and Elm. Chef/owner Michael is right in the middle where you can watch him cook. Peter Havens (Elliot Street) is very elegant with wonderful art on display. The seafood is always exceptional. Tom, one of the owners, is the most gracious host in town. If you get to know him, he'll tell you the saltiest jokes.

The middle tier of restaurants includes the fabulously popular **Chelsea Royal Diner** (Route 9, West Brattleboro), which features all manner of diner food, Mexican specialties, and

seafood. **The Three Seasons Cafe** (down the alley next to Rite Aid, off Main Street) serves breakfast baked goods and lunch only, but affords a view of the river as you dine al fresco. Owners Marcia and Mohammed serve up delicious sandwiches, salads, unbeatable baked goods, and coffee beverages. This is THE hangout for international visitors as Mohammed speaks several languages and is, we think, the only Mohammed in Brattleboro. Across from Sam's, check out **Carol's** for deli sandwiches, specials, baked goods, and food just like Mom used to make. **Sarkis Market** (Putney Road) features authentic Lebanese food that can also be found in area stores and at the **Mideast Feast** cart on Elliot Street. Some of the best Chinese food in the VMag area is found at **Panda North** under the giant TEA sign on Putney Road. Try the crispy fish—it'll scare you senseless but it tastes great. At the **Latchis Grill**, you can dine downstairs and then head upstairs for a movie.

Finally, this town has more pizza than it has parades, more pizza than Northampton has restaurants! Most of it is Greek pizza, though there is a **Pizza Hut** and a **Little Caesar's**. Downtown, it's **Frankie's** in the Harmony lot. Near Exit 1, **Vermont Inn Pizza** rules. At the north end of town, stop at **Exit 3 Village Pizza**. Our favorite pizza is just north of Brattleboro at **Putney Village Pizza** where Johnny makes a nice pie.

COFFEE AND OTHER DRUGS

Mocha Joe's is the only coffee roaster in town. Pierre and Ellen named this coffee house after Joe the Cobbler when they took over his space on Main Street. There is



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occasional entertainment and always great coffee, tea, and other beverages. The snackies foods here are worth the trip and you can linger over a game of checkers or chess. Just off the Harmony lot, there's a little cafe called **Coffee Country**. **The Cafe Beyond at Collected Works** (High Street) is a great place to fall in love over coffee or other beverages, sandwiches and snack items. The previously mentioned **Three Seasons Cafe** offers European-style coffees and is only open spring, summer, and fall. All of the coffee places in Brattleboro are locally owned.

Got a jones for some chocolate? **Tom and Sally's** on Elliot Street will satisfy even the pickiest chocoholic with their handmade chocolates. If you can't decide whether to send your honey flowers or chocolates, bring a box of chocolate flowers from Tom and Sally's. For ice cream, where else but **Ice Cream Heaven** for Bart's, Snow's or frozen yogurt (at the Burrito Exchange, Flat Street).

Hotel Pharmacy on Elliot Street is an independent drug store in the former Methodist Church. The three pharmacists and staff are known for helpful information. If they get to know you well, the insults are free. This place is just a little different -- where else can you get a dose of Jim Hendrix while waiting for your Viagra?

DRINK

McNeill's is a funky little place (Elliot Street) where Ray McNeill has been brewing beers for over a decade. Try the Big Nose Blonde. **Windham Brewery** at the Latchis (Flat Street) provides a variety of beers to the Burrito Exchange. One of our favorite bars is downstairs at the Latchis, the perfect place for a drink with your sweetie. Need to unload the day's woes? Head over to the **Mole's Eye Cafe** (High Street) for a drink and a bite and talk to Norman, Brattleboro's favorite bartender. **The Marina** (Putney Road, on the river) is a great place to grab a bite and socialize. Both the Mole's Eye and the Marina have live music. **Walker's** (Main Street) is a convenient place to meet friends. The bar at **Peter Havens** is nice but small and often filled with diners waiting for a table. Just north of Brattleboro on Route 5 (Dummerston) is the **Rainbow Cattle Company**, a wonderful gathering place for gays from all over.

LIVE MUSIC

There's the Mole's Eye and the Marina for rock, blues, open mic nights, and jazz jams. Classical music is the feature of the **Marlboro Music Festival** (802.254.2394) held weekends July through August in nearby Marlboro (west on 9). A chamber music series featuring well-known artists and conservatory students takes place in Putney (north on 91 or 5) at the **Yellow Barn** through August (802.387.6637). The Vermont Jazz Center features world-class performers at the old **Dunham Factory** on Cotton Mill Hill in Brattleboro (802.365.7069 for classes and schedules).

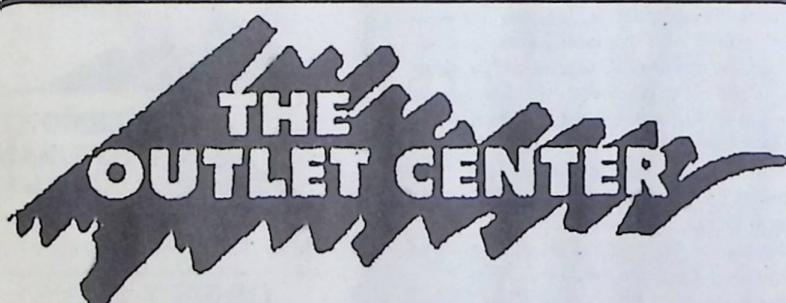
EVENTS

This town has a parade for every imaginable occasion. **The Riff Raff Regatta** at the Marina takes place on July 26th starting at 10am. This includes handmade highly decorated crafts and is followed by the Duck Derby. These events benefit the teen center. On July 23-26, **Village Days and the Earth Spirit Festival** will be held downtown and feature vendors selling herbs, natural products, antiques, crafts, and homemade goods as well as sidewalk sales and entertainment. Every Saturday there's the **Farmer's Market** from 9am until 2pm on Western Avenue near the Creamery Bridge. On Wednesdays there's also a market on the **Brattleboro Common** from 10am to 2pm.

The Gallery Walk takes place the first Friday of each month from 5-8pm featuring several exceptional Brattleboro galleries. On December 31st Brattleboro celebrates **Last Night** with sleigh rides, skiing, and skating at Living Memorial Park. There are shows for adults and kids and fireworks as well.

BOOKS

The Book Cellar (Main Street) is the oldest and largest bookstore in town. **Collected Works** (High Street) has a great selection of books and magazines and that fabulous Cafe Beyond, as well as comfy places to relax with a book. **Brattleboro Books** and **Everyone's Books** are both on Elliot Street and offer an interesting array of books. **Baker's** (Main Street) stocks new paperbacks. **Baskets** (Harmony lot) has used paperbacks. **Here and Now and Then** (Midtown Mall) buys and sells used books. Our favorite bookstore for ambience and friendliness is **Mystery/Trek Books** (Elliot Street). Rob stocks new and used discount paperbacks as well as video rentals. Another favorite is **Heartstone Books** on Kimball Hill in



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MOVIES / VIDEOS

The Latchis Theater (Main Street) is an old theater that was renovated to house a few screens. This is the place for new movies and art films and the occasional film festival. **The Kipling Cinemas** on Putney Road is a multiplex screening new movies and the occasional art film. **First Run Video** (Putney Road) is locally owned and features the American Film Institute's top 400. Mystery/Trek Books also rents videos. The only other video store around is **Blockbuster** (Canal Street).

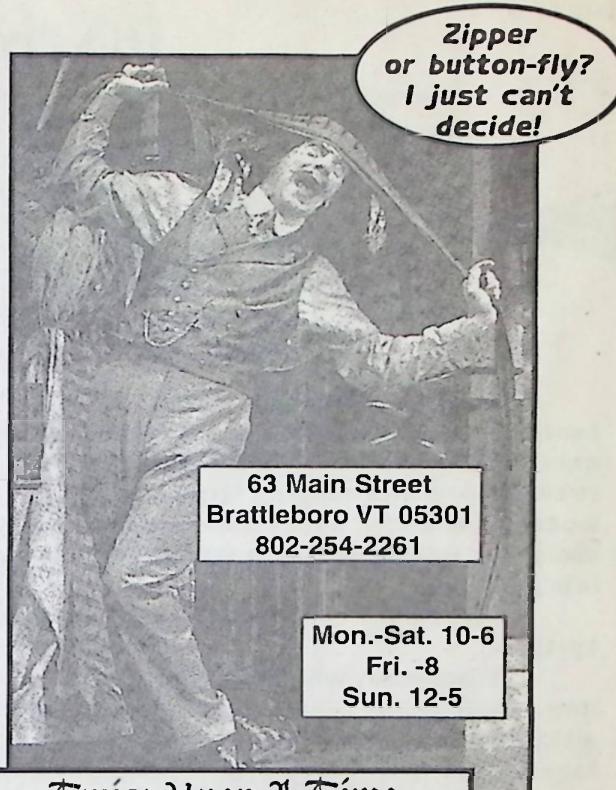
ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

We could go on and on with all the places to go and things to see around Brattleboro. Don't miss the covered bridges (also known as kissing bridges for their opportunities for privacy)—the **Creamery Bridge** over Whetstone Brook on Western Avenue and a recently renovated one spanning the West River on Route 30 in Dummerston. Near the Creamery Bridge, enjoy **Living Memorial Park** with its swimming pool, softball diamonds, baseball field, basketball court, tennis, playgrounds, cookout facilities, ice skating rink, ski trails, outdoor amphitheater and Kiwanis Shelter for outdoor gatherings. At the Marina, take a tour on the **Belle of Brattleboro** which cruises the Connecticut River. Sometimes there's live music on board. Across Putney Road, rent a canoe at the **Vermont Canoe Touring Center**. **Retreat Tower** affords excellent views of Brattleboro and the Connecticut River Valley as well as walking trails. Also on the grounds of **Brattleboro Retreat** (one of the nation's oldest private mental health facilities) is a Petting Zoo. The **Brattleboro Museum and Art Center** (Main and Vernon) features changing exhibits of art and local history. You won't want to miss **Santa's Land** (Route 5, Putney). It's a Christmas theme village and animal park for children of all ages.

SHOP TILL YOU DROP

There's something for everyone and far too many stores to mention. Start out at Exit 1 with the many shops in the **Outlet Center** and then continue downtown. Our favorites include **Pink Flamingo** (Elliot Street) and **Body and Sole** (Main Street) for clothing and shoes, **Sam's Outdoor Outfitters** (Main Street), **Vermont Artisan Designs** (Main Street) and the adjoining **Kitchen Sync** for beautiful art and everything but the kitchen sink, **Twice Upon A Time** (Main Street) for antiques and second-hand clothing, the **Shoe Tree** (Main Street), and **Beadniks** (Main Street) for all kinds of funky stuff including **South Park** beads. Save the

Corporations has a pretty good mix of organic cotton and hemp and environmentally sound cleaning products and more. **Galanes** has Vermont tee shirts and other souvenirs in their Vermont Shop. **Rap City** (401 Main), **Meridian's** (Elliot Street) and **Mainly Music** (Main Street, down from the Latchis) all have great selections of all forms of music. If you've had it with shopping, how about a tattoo at either **Beadniks** or **Green Mountain Tattoos** (Elliot Street) — they're legal in Vermont.



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I LIKE BIKING

Maybe its because I'm built like Janeane Garofalo when she's retaining, or maybe its because I'm sick of my retro-sucking-brother singing Queen's "Fat-Bottomed Girls" every time he projects on me after failing to get anything off his no-hip girlfriend.

Maybe its cuz I'm looking at twenty-five.

Whatever, whichever, the bottom line (yeah yeah) is that I recently bought an old Raleigh Trek and have taken up biking. Well, my own style of biking, anyway. Which means solo, early morning, hour-long cruises around Northampton's downtown neighborhoods and/or river meadows. I'm up with the Honor Court and returning just as the lawyers start slithering around, sipping and hissing into their grounds.

If I'm feeling up to it (depends on the night before) I do the Norwottuck Rail Trail into Hadley, stopping to watch the bison mums and babies at the buffalo farm just north of the Route 9 underpass, before turning around. Sometimes I even go all the way to the Belchertown end. Sometimes I throw The Hybrid* onto the Civic and head over to any one of my favorite "trails" (see below).

And yes I wear a helmet. (Next thing you know I'll give up smoking.)

Has it done anything for my butt? asks the retro-suck-wad.

I ignore him. Someday he'll get lucky and then he'll breed and we'll all be

*I've named my bike The Hybrid because that's what it looks like after I personalized it with various alien stickers and spray-ops. Peter Fonda sez that through customization a bike becomes an extension of one's self; the act of personalization becomes a bond. He was, of course, talking about motorcycles but hey, it works on bicycles, too.

doomed. Truth be known, though, Yes I can see my body changing. I'm no size 7 but I am firmer, toner, and even starting to tan. But the best thing is being up in the morning before all the rest of you slugs, before all the traffic and jam. Before the vacuum-suck of the work-day shags you past your life.

The morning, where one can still pause to see.

Here are **5 BIKING TREKS** that I recommend. (In no particular order. The great thing about biking is that you really can bike anywhere. But always bring along plenty of water.):

1. QUABBIN RESERVOIR (Route 9, Belchertown). You can either stick to the paved roads within the "tamed" part of the reservoir park... or you can take any number of the "old, untamed" gravel roads that lead off from the reservoir's surrounding access gates. The best of the latter are found along both Routes 202 and 32A. Wildlife I've seen: deer, porcupine, turkeys, eagles, and a coyote who watched me until I turned towards her and then she simply vanished - gone.

2. THE NORWOTTUCK RAIL TRAIL (3 places to park yer car: Elwell State Park on Damon Road in Northampton, Station Road in South Amherst, and the Dead Mall in Hadley). 8.5 mile one full-length way. Excellent re-engineering of an unused train track. Easy. Pretty. But oh so crowded. Only worth doing in the early morning. Or late at night beneath a full

moon. But stay off the moors...

3. ROUTE 5, NORTH FROM BRATTLEBORO. Feeling lucky, punk? This one's around 25 miles, over moderate hills, past farms and mountains into Putney. If you come back by turning onto School Road, the steep climb will take you across the longest single-span covered bridge in Vermont (and onto Route 30 back to Brat). Textbook New England.

4. DOWNTOWN HOLYOKE. Best in the a.m. before the traffic picks up. Downtown's one-ways are a navigational plus. Wonderful architecture, great Latin shops and markets. We love to honor multi-culturalism but who really spends any time downtown Holyoke? You have nothing to fear but fear itself.

5. SKINNER STATE PARK (Route 47, Hadley). Start at the bottom and just do it. Up, up and away. The view from the Summit House is the best reward around. And then you get to coast all the way down!

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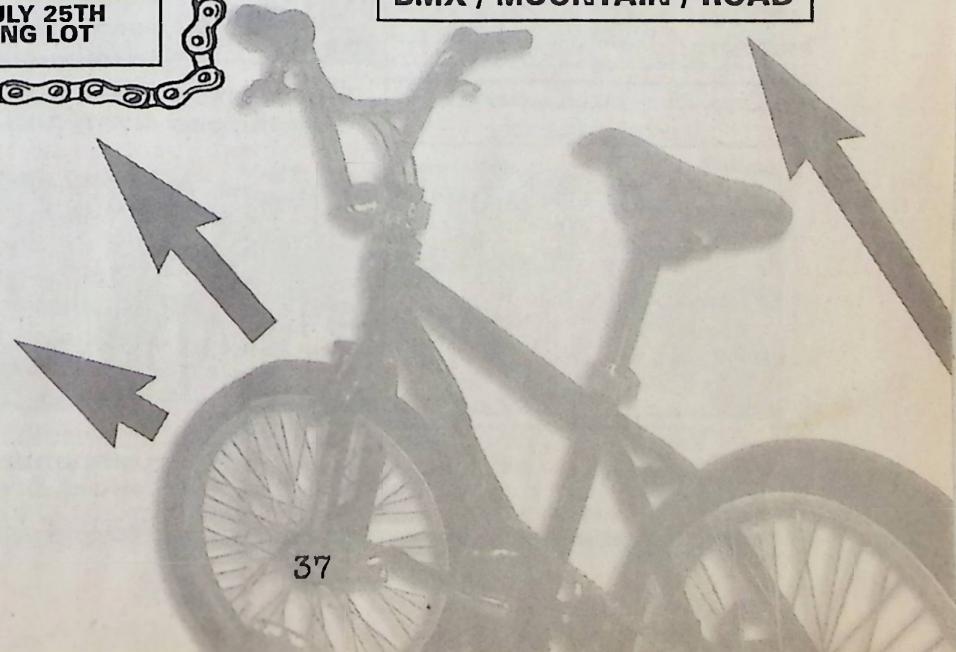


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Day 11 -- beyond here westerners couldn't go.



So I had to turn around and start walking back.



Day by day, step by step.



Day 21 -- back where I started.



They put the throne down. Out stepped a tiny girl.



She had a golden needle through her tongue.



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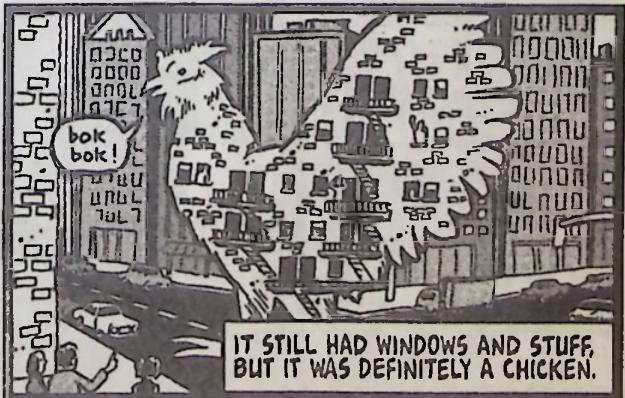
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SLOW WAVE

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Send us your comments!

Yeah *VMag*. I'm calling about the "Worst of the Valley" issue. Ok — pages 34 to 36 — "Nutpeas" by Rick Veitch. That... is... brilliant..! This guy rules! So get some more from this cartoonist. And... does he do his own comics? Just... get some more. Thanks.

(voice-mail / june 8)

Rick Veitch has been writing and/or drawing comics for the past twenty years. His most recent work appeared in the recently-defunct Supreme title from Awesome Comics. Rick has also self-published a number of books over the years under his King Hell imprint, most notably Rare Bit Fiends. For more info write to King Hell Press, POB 1371, West Townsend, VT 05359.

Hey really liked your MAG! Lots of talent! Like DeWinter stories and artwork was great. Nice variety of material. Keep up the good work. I picked up mine at Barnes & Noble in Holyoke.

-Chris

(email / june 17)

You know I just have to say that you gotta stop wasting money putting out this magazine. I mean, come on. This is probably the lamest magazine I've ever... reached for. And the... and the comics... they're just — I mean, what the hell. You shouldn't have to think deeply about, um, four boxes, some cartoons and a little bit of, ah, words. Come on! Two people? It takes two people to come up with this *Slow Wave* garbage? What does that shit mean? And this magazine, I mean... each issue gets worse. I mean, give it up. Later.

(voice-mail / june 19 / 9:46pm)

Um, Murphy, this is the guy who just called and left a message. Don't write this off as some crackpot leaving you some message. I'm sober. I'm not drunk. I'm not high. I'm not stoned. This magazine sucks, dude. I mean it.

(voice-mail / june 19 / 9:53pm)

Hell... I wish I was that sober.

My Dear Murph -

I congratulate you on the latest issue of *VMag*. Your dark sensibility is manifest in the fiction you've selected, a much more honest take on the state of things than, say, the quasi-inspirational stuff one sees in most local publications. You know the stuff I mean, all that sensitive feminist drivel and New Age gooiness churned out by graduates of M.F.A. programs and other workshop spawn. Come what may with the public's reaction, I encourage you in your effort to hold up a mirror to life in this valley, showing it for what it is, shadows and all.

Having had a chance to read your I.D. in *Hampshire Life*

some weeks ago, I am struck by the implications of your mixed heritage. Irish and Macedonian! My God, this is the stuff of a truly moody, even despairing sensibility, not to mention a possible bipolar disorder. I say this without prejudice, for I tend to look with favor upon people who publish my work, I don't care how depressing they may be.

I do have one complaint, however. I am a little touchy about the pronunciation of my name, which, if one went by the spelling you used, would rhyme with "runnier," as in my cold is worse and my nose is runnier. This is a common error, I'm afraid. But in the hope that you will someday publish more of my work, please note that there is an accent over the e which would make the true pronunciation as follows (imagine a Canadian mugger speaking): Give me your money, eh. I have been told by some French speakers that this can't possibly be correct, but that was how my parents did it, and if they were wrong-headed, then I honor their wrong-headedness. Indeed, I celebrate it.

Thanks again.

A. Brunnier (with an accent over the e)

P.S. If you wish to print this letter as a "correction," I give you my blessing. Is there any chance that I can be paid at the same rate per word? Or do I have to give this one away? (email / june 23)

Bipolar disorder? Maybe that's why I'm publishing this damn thing... Bipolar? Hey – does this mean I can blame both my parents?



Just passing through the area?
 Leaving soon to go away to school?
 To take that job offer? To flee The Man?
 Yeah, well now you don't have to leave VMag behind...

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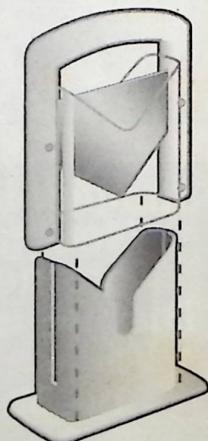


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We've all been there: You get a great idea, need to remember a phone number, have to sketch something, draw a map, write down a lyric... and there's no paper anywhere. The next time this happens, help will be as close as a copy of VMag. Through issue 13, Larien Products (a great little Northampton company) will sponsor this "creativity page." Now, when you get hit with a brainstorm or just need to put something down on paper, grab the nearest writing implement and a copy of VMag and GO WILD!

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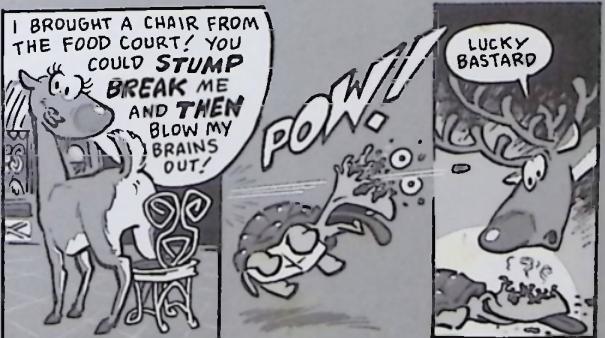
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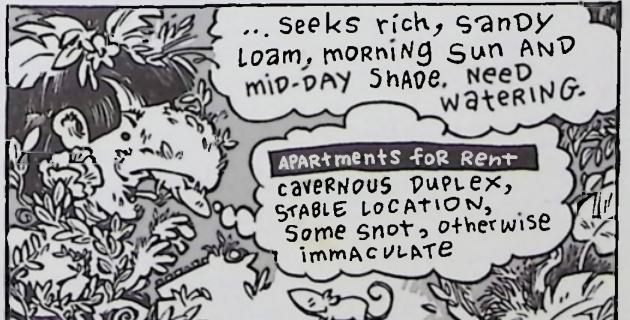
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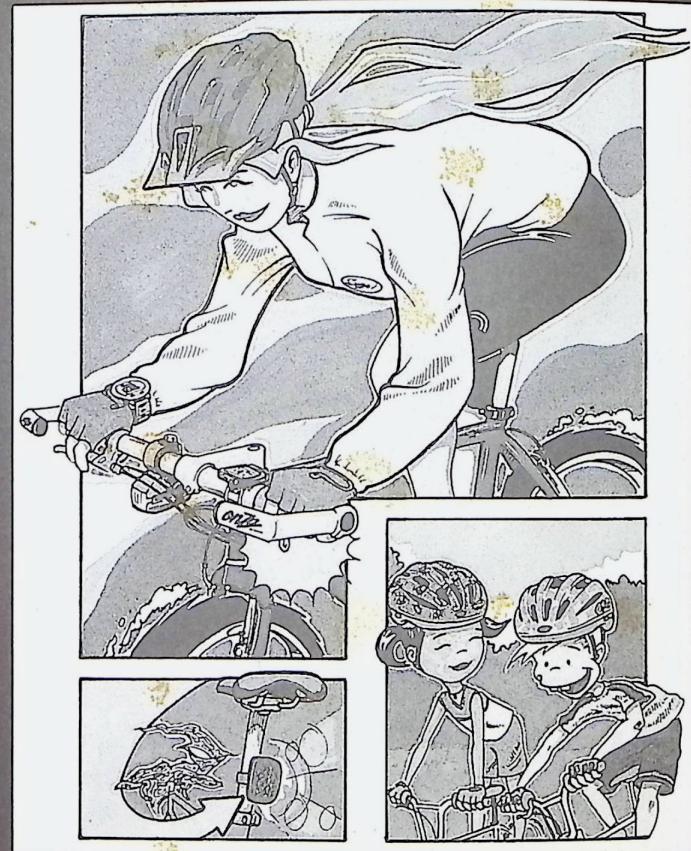
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